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by Alexander Blade

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SECRET OF THE YELLOW CRYSTAL

by Guy Archette

THE PROP

by William Lawrence Hamling



• LIFE ON JUPITER •

By HENRY GADE

(See cover painting by Frank R. Paul)

On our cover this month we present the artist's conception of the inhabitants of the planet Jupiter, deduced in imagination from scientific facts about that world as astronomers know them

Jupiter is by far the largest of all the planets, in fact being larger than all of them combined. This in itself assures the fact that any living being on this world would be vastly different than any we would encounter on any of the other worlds. But in order to understand just what form this life would take, it is necessary to understand the conditions on this giant world.

Its mean distance from the sun is 483,000,000 miles. Its sidereal period is 11.86 years, and the synodic is 399 days, which means that Jupiter comes to opposition a month and four days later each year.

Jupiter is distinctly oval, having an equatorial diameter of 88,200 miles, while its polar diameter is 83,000 miles. Its mean diameter is 86,500 miles, which is very nearly eleven times that of earth. It has a mass of 316 times that of earth. However, its density is less than one fourth that of earth, but exactly equal to that of the sun. On Jupiter, a surface gravity pull of $2 \frac{2}{3}$ that of earth exists, but it varies, as much as 20%, between equator and poles, due to its rapid rotation.

The planet's atmosphere is extremely extensive. Some astronomers hold that it is a liquid planet, and that all we see are atmospheric conditions, hiding the real surface. However, its gravity and its mass make it extremely logical that areas of solid earth are quite possible, and indeed, to be expected.

One of the most mysterious features of Jupiter is its so-called "Red Spot". This spot is "sub-permanent", insofar as its appearance is concerned, since it apparently fades at times until it becomes only a ghost of itself. However, it seems to retain its general shape, and although its period of rotation changes, indicating that it is a floating area, it is possible that it indicates a more solid mass than the rest of the planet.

There are many things about the planet that indicate a high temperature. For instance, the abundance of clouds and their swift transformations. With all this shade, and the fact that the planet receives from the sun only $1/27$ th of the heat received by earth, it seems that the planet itself is possessed of internal heat, since its luminosity definitely is greater than it should be by simple reflection of sunlight. Indications are that this is not due to any radio-active condition. With this intense cloud blanket, there would exist a great degree of condensation, which would mean a heated, humid climate. Nor would any great amount of heat radiate away.

Considering all these scientific factors, the man of Jupiter would be a massive creature of tremendous strength, built along lines that would enable him to move about under the terrific gravity attraction of the planet.

He would not support his body on legs that would elevate him to any great degree off the surface, but would move by the dual motion of an undulating body, in contact with the earth, and supplementary legs of short, stocky, powerful nature.

He would be heavily armored, possibly with a thick, leathery hide that even a rifle bullet might have trouble penetrating. To a great degree, his torso might be constructed as is that of a turtle, with heavy plates on the under side, to allow for constant scraping and dragging along the surface.

The main portion of the body might always remain prone, with only the forepart possessing the ability to raise itself. The entire body would be stocky and heavy, and joints would be constructed on an overlapping, interlocking scale system.

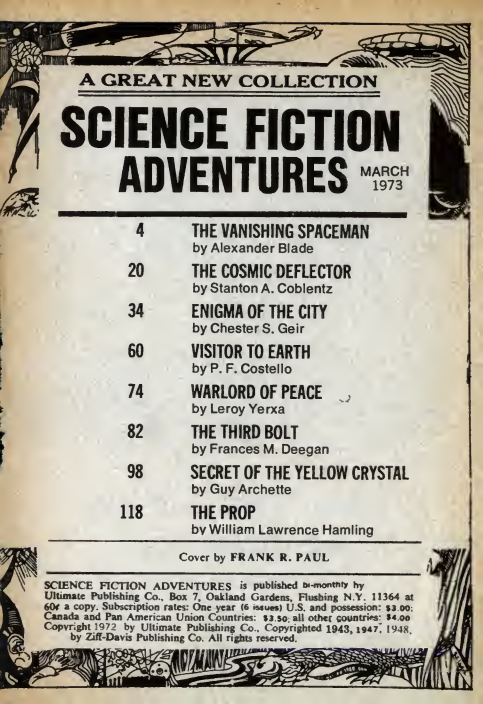
In such a world, due to the great heat, the Jovian would be enabled, by means of sharp teeth, to eat things of a herbivorous nature, such as wood, tough fibres, in addition to the usual carnivorous diet of a primitive world in which growth is rampant and lush.

The Jovian would not be a great fighter. He would be slow, ponderous, and too bulky to maneuver about. However, he would be more than a match for any earth beast, since Jovian gravity would almost prostrate an earth being.

The earthman who visits Jupiter, must be careful to take along with him a small tractor car with very powerful motors. If he does not, he will be helpless to move about since he would weigh in the neighborhood of six hundred pounds on the surface of this giant world.

Also, in the dense atmosphere, which would be impossible to breathe, with his weak lung muscles, he would have to devise his own air supply, in an air-tight tractor-car. In order to speak, he would need an amplifier, to make sounds loud enough to vibrate the heavy air. Lacking such equipment, he could not leave his space ship.

Lacking initiative, which would be depressed by the great energy expended in merely moving about, the Jovian would not demonstrate any great animosity to the visiting earthman, but merely tolerate any creature that did not directly harm them. At best, they would exhibit only momentary curiosity. Intelligence would be low.



A GREAT NEW COLLECTION

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Cover by **FRANK R. PAUL**

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The Vanishing Spaceman

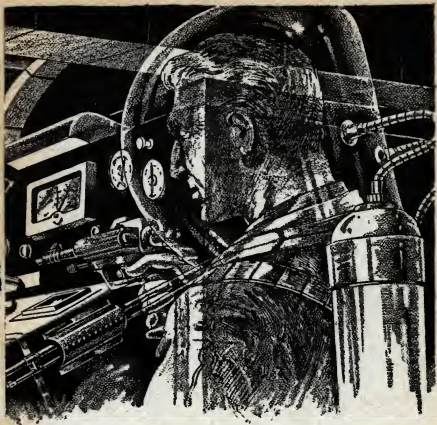
by Alexander Blade

THE door burst open as if under the force of a sudden violent gust of wind.

Captain Curt Evers looked up sharply from the log book in which he had

been writing. His eyes widened as they took in the face of the man who stumbled into the cabin.

Navigator Pete Ash's features were starkly white, twisted in a wildness



Men do not evaporate into thin air, or into space, for that matter, or do they? It seemed here was one space man who vanished!

which somehow went deeper than terror.

"Captain! Another one—Geary, the technician. Buck Geary's gone! He... he's disappeared like the rest!"

Captain Curt Evers' "Damn!" was a part of his explosively released breath. He shot from his chair, demanded, "When did it happen?"

"Just a moment ago, Captain. He

was down in the engine room, talking to Mike Blount and me. Then—all of a sudden—he was gone!” Pete Ash snapped his fingers. “He went just like that.”

Evers started for the door, his face bleak. He tossed words in his wake:

“First Creedy, then Sedden, and now Geary. That makes three. If this keeps up, the *Ad Astra* will be the only one to make the expedition to Pluto—and as empty as the day she left the factory!”

Mike Blount was still in the engine room. The reason, when he hastily corked the bottle and shoved it out of sight into the rear pocket of his dungarees, became apparent. Evers ignored the bottle and the guilt on the stocky engineer's face. He said:

“Give me your version of it, Mike.”

Blount gulped. “Cap, it wasn't the whiskey. Pete, there, was a witness. Him and me and Geary were talking about the engines. I was explaining how the new radial injectors function—pointing, you see; and when I looked at Geary to see if he was following . . . well, he just wasn't there anymore! I only had my eyes off him a second. He couldn't have jumped out the door without Pete or me noticing it.”

“Yeah—and I had his uniform in the corner of my eye,” Ash added. “When it vanished suddenly, I thought he had moved and looked around. But he was gone—and without making a sound of any kind. It . . . it's damned spooky, Captain!”

Evers asked, “You searched for Geary?”

Mike Blount gestured around the long low room, filled compactly with its parallel rows of drive engines.

“I know this place by heart, Cap. A Martian sand-flea couldn't hide in here without me knowing about it. Whatever happened to Geary, it's certain that he's anywhere hut in this part of

the ship.”

Pete Ash made a short grating sound. “It's also certain that he isn't anywhere on the ship at all. Remember that chemist guy, George Creedy, and my co-pilot, Bud Sedden? When they disappeared, we combed the whole tub for them—and never found the slightest trace of either one. Buck Geary's gone, and it's no use looking for him.”

“We'll search just the same,” Evers said, shrugging wearily. “A mere formality, maybe, but our sponsors will want to see the log if and when we get back to Earth.” He turned as the sound of voices and footsteps in the passageway reached his ears. Men came crowding excitedly into the engine room. Through that strange mental bond which develops between men thrown together for a long period, the members of the expedition as well as the ship's crew had become aware that something was wrong.

EVERS' eyes ran over them apprehensively, like a shepherd counting his flock after an attack by wolves. There was geologist Vic Hobbs, biologist Andy Perggia, metallurgist Harry Tate, astronomer Frank Ying, the crew of four, and——

“Where's Kraskov?” Evers rapped suddenly.

“Probably in his cahin, puttering over his what's-it,” Vic Hobbs volunteered.

Tate queried, “What happend, Captain? Another man hasn't——?”

Evers nodded grimly. “Buck Geary, the technician. Gone—vanished like the rest, it seems. But we're going to search the ship just the same. You men must have the procedure down pat by now. Be thorough, even if you don't expect to find anything. Ash, you go to the control room and see that the robot's keeping the ship on its course.”

For the third time every nook and cranny of the *Ad Astra* was explored. And for the third time nothing was found. Evers, who had been conducting the search, gave up with a sigh.

"All right, I'm convinced. Geary's gone. The next time—though I sincerely hope there won't be a next time—I'm just going to write 'Ditto' in the log."

The men separated into groups and made off for their usual haunts, muttering forebodingly. Evers chewed a lip in thoughtful silence for a moment. Then he strode toward the cabin of Herlin Kraskov, the physicist of the expedition.

The door was slow in opening in response to his raps.

"Oh—Captain Evers! Come in, come in! Do come in." Blinking owlishly, the elderly physicist pulled open the door wider, and Evers squeezed into the room. The door, it seemed, wouldn't open far enough to permit a more normal method of entrance.

Once inside, the reason for this became apparent. The interior of Kraskov's cabin was filled from floor to ceiling with an incredible and indescribable assortment of objects which ranged from cosmic ray counters and spectroscopes to just plain junk. In a relatively clear portion of the place stood a nightmarish-looking mechanism, which gave Evers the impression of having been constructed from the cabin's choicest pieces of errata.

Kraskov pointed to this and said, "Blast it! Won't work—that is, it won't work the way I want it to. The frequency I'm using, perhaps. Wonderful device, though. Uses vibrations to determine the extent and degree of heat of the molten inner core of a planet. It will revolutionize all theories on the age of the planets that constitute our system. Since the degree of cooling in-

creases directly in proportion to the distance from the sun—"

"That isn't what I came to see you about," Evers interrupted quickly. "One of the reasons for my visit was to see if you were still on the ship. The other—Geary has vanished as completely as Creedy and Sedden."

Kraskov nodded his untidy gray head absently. "Another? How unfortunate. Tut, tut! Really unfortunate. Cosmic rays, no doubt. I have a theory which will revolutionize thought in certain scientific circles. You see, cosmic rays, in conjunction with other unknown space rays, may have attributes which bring about the disintegration of organic matter. Now this—"

"You can tell me about it later," Evers broke in impatiently. "I've got a lot to attend to right now." He wormed his way hastily from the cabin and went to the control room.

PETE ASH whirled with the suddenness of strained nerves as Evers entered. The navigator's face was lined and haggard.

"Don't mind me, Captain. I'm going a little nuts, I guess. But then this whole blasted business is nuts. Men disappearing from a ship right in the middle of space. . . ."

Evers sank into the adjoining pilot chair, expelling breath in a tired sigh. "I know. There's no sense to it. Such a thing has never happened before in all the history of space travel."

"Captain, has it ever occurred to you that the disappearances may be due to the fact that no one has ever struck out this far into space before? Look. Finston reached Mars, then Von Helmes got to Venus. After that, for almost fifty years, that's as far as we went. Then Elton brought out the Uranium-X combustion chamber, and we reached Jupiter and Saturn. More than Sev-

enty years passed before Keeley invented the Hypatomic Drive and we could go further than that. And what happened? Instead of making for one of the nearest planets after Saturn, we have to be ambitious and head clear out to Pluto." Ash leaned forward, his eyes glittering. His voice lowered.

"We took a sudden jump into unknown territory. There may be things this far out in space that we never encountered before, that we never imagined existed. Rays, forces, fields, or a hundred other things which we know nothing about and have no names for.

"Do you see? There's something in this part of space that is increasing in intensity the farther we travel. This something is . . . well, I'm no scientist to explain it; but whatever it is, it's causing us to vanish one by one. And, Captain, the longer we keep on going, the more and faster we're going to disappear. Had we taken the jump in proper order, we'd have found out about it and been prepared. But as it is, we're already a long distance past the orbit of Uranus and rapidly approaching that of Neptune."

Evers was staring into distance with the unblinking steadiness of deep thought. He was disturbed. He recalled what Kraskov had said: "Cosmic rays, in conjunction with other unknown space rays, may have attributes which bring about the disintegration of organic matter." It seemed strange that Pete Ash should have the same idea, though in more nebulous terms. But it was an idea which might very well account for the disappearances which had taken place.

Evers repeated Kraskov's statement to Ash. The navigator said nothing, but his eyes blazed suddenly and an expression of certainty crossed his face.

Evers said, "Kraskov may like to spout scientific nonsense, but I think

he hit the nail on the head this time. He's a genius in his line—that's why he was chosen for the expedition."

"Aside from the coincidence that Kraskov and I thought of the same thing at almost the same time, it's just about the only logical explanation for the disappearances," Ash stated. "And if it's true——"

Evers made a sudden gesture. "I know. If it's true, then we'll have to turn back. But, hell, Ash, we've got to be sure first! We've got to be certain of the danger, certain that it's unsurmountable, before we take an action like that. Why this expedition has cost millions! Our sponsors would break us, collectively and individually, if we came running home like scared kids, with nothing to show for all the money they've spent. Damn!" Evers rubbed a hand agitatedly over his face. He said finally:

"Ash, you'll be on duty a lot, now that Sedden is gone, so you'll need plenty of rest. Go take a sedative and turn in. As for me, I'm going to think this out."

Ash nodded and rose. He left the control room unsteadily.

EVERS studied the graph of the course, then checked over the instruments. He corrected the robot pilot the merest of points. Finally he sat back and tried to get his thoughts into order.

He was undecided as to what to do—continue the voyage, or turn back. There was every reason to do both. To keep on going was almost certain to mean more disappearances, and to turn back would mean trouble where the sponsors of the expedition were concerned. Hard-headed businessmen, they would scoff at Evers' explanation. They might even out of spite accuse Evers and the others of a criminal conspiracy

and use the influence of their combined wealth to have the survivors of the *Ad Astra* sent to prison.

Evers was confused and uncertain, and because he was a leader to whom feelings like these were foreign, more than a little angry also. Never before had he encountered anything like this strange menace which came, unseen and unheard, to snatch men bodily from a vessel hurtling through empty space.

There came a sudden click from the inter-ship communicator to the right of the instrument panel. "Captain Evers! Calling Captain Evers!" It was Harry Tate's voice, shrill with urgency.

His muscles taut with dread, Evers made contact. "Yes? What is it?"

"Perggia's just vanished, Captain! Andy Perggia, the biologist."

Evers' lips drew tight against his teeth. "Four!" he hissed. "Lord!" He leaped from the chair and strode from the room with stiff-legged haste. He found the men gathered in General Lounge. They were bunched together silently, their eyes darting nervously about the room. An atmosphere of shock and horror clung about them like an electric cloud.

Tate hurried forward and grasped Evers' arm in a frantic clutch. He blurted:

"Captain—it was uncanny! Perggia was sitting here with the rest of us. Then, without warning, he began to flicker!" The metallurgist gulped air loudly. "I know how crazy it sounds, but that's what happened. All of a sudden, Perggia began to grow dim and indistinct, the outlines of his body wavering like smoke. I shouted and jumped from my chair—but before I could reach him, he was gone. He . . . he just faded away!"

Evers husked, "No clues? Anything?" He glanced rapidly from face to face. But the men stared back at

him, silent and wide-eyed. A few heads shook in a slow negative.

"This is impossible!" Evers snarled. "There must have been some——" His voice snapped off. His lean body flashed into sudden furious action. He leaped straight at Vic Hobbs, his fingers spread out wide and curved to clutch.

For the geologist's body had begun to blur. It was vanishing.

The room was a kaleidoscopic whirl of sound and action. And then movement steadied. Evers was down on one knee, staring blankly at his empty hands.

Of Vic Hobbs there was no trace.

Evers found his voice. "Great jumping asteroids! He . . . he melted right through my fingers!"

Henkel, one of the four members of the crew, began laughing in the high strained key of hysteria. The others didn't lose self-control to that extent, but their pale faces showed how close they were to breaking.

"Stop that!" Evers snapped at Henkel. He whirled to the others. "Stay here. Keep your eyes on each other—even hold hands."

EVERS turned and ran to Kraskov's cabin. The old physicist hadn't been among those present in the lounge. Neither had Pete Ash. Evers knew Ash was taking a much-needed rest, and that Kraskov lived the same hermit-like existence aboard ship that he lived in his laboratory on Earth. But Evers wanted to make sure both were still on the ship, for he wasn't sure about anything any more.

Reaching Kraskov's cabin, Evers didn't bother with the formality of knocking, but pushed the door open sharply. It smashed into the litter of apparatus piled behind it, making a ringing clatter of sound.

Kraskov, bent over his machine,

looked up with startled suddenness. He peered closely through his thick spectacles a moment. Then:

"Oh . . . Captain Evers. Good of you to visit me again. Frankly, I'm at my wits' end. This damnable device simply refuses to function properly. I've tried every frequency between here and infinity, but no——"

Evers gritted, "Never mind that! Two more men have disappeared. We've got to do something while there are still enough of us left to do it."

"What? More disappearances, Captain? My, my! Annoying, isn't it? However, it shouldn't take many men to make a complete search of the ship. Well, as I was saying. . ."

"Stow it, damn it!" Evers shouted. "Can't you seem to understand that we're all in deadly danger? Go down to General Lounge and remain there with the rest of the men. Do you hear? Go down to General Lounge. This is serious."

Kraskov blinked bewilderedly, becoming aware by slow degrees that something was radically wrong. He said, "Oh," in a barely audible voice and started for the door.

"General Lounge," Evers reminded. "And stay there." He watched the old scientist move down the passageway, then started for Pete Ash's cabin.

The lanky navigator was deep under the effects of the sleeping tablets which he had taken. Evers' attempts to wake him met with no success. Biting his lip, Evers glanced around the cabin. There was a huge spaceman's trunk in one corner which might possibly have contained something which could be used as a stimulant to revive Ash. But Evers shrugged and left. It would take time to awaken Ash, and besides the navigator needed all the rest he could get.

Back in General Lounge, Evers ran

his eyes over the assembled men, taking stock. The members of the expedition had dwindled down to astronomer Frank Ying, metallurgist Harry Tate, physicist Herlin Kraskov, navigator Pete Ash, Evers himself, and the crew of four, consisting of Henkel, Sharp, Finch, and Burney.

"What is the purpose of this gathering, Captain?" Frank Ying wanted to know. "Since we are quite ignorant of the cause of the disappearances, there is nothing which we can do to stop them."

"I am well aware of that fact," Evers said. "But that isn't what I want to discuss. I want you men to help me make a decision which would be too drastic in its consequences to each of us for me to make alone. The thing to be decided is whether or not we should turn back.

"**A**S YOU all know, we are not really a scientific expedition. Our main purpose in going to Pluto is to determine if it contains faltronium, and if so to stake out claims in the name of the corporation sponsoring us. Indications are such that there should be a tremendous amount of the element on Pluto. That, of course, is why we are taking the hop directly to this remote planet instead of stopping at Uranus or Neptune first. These worlds are covered with miles-deep layers of frozen gases which would make a search enormously difficult. Since Pluto cooled the quickest, it should have the largest deposits of faltronium, and these relatively near the surface.

"Now the outfitting of this expedition has cost our sponsors millions of dollars. Naturally, they'll be anything but happy to have us return with nothing to show for their money but a screwy yarn of disappearances in space. They might very likely start proceedings

which would land us all in jail. On the other hand, for us to keep on going will undoubtedly mean further disappearances. Men have never struck out this far into space before, and it seems that we are encountering conditions which we cannot hope to overcome.

"So it's up to you men to decide what shall be done. The issue is quite clear. More disappearances will result if we continue the voyage. And there'll be a lot of unpleasantness if we return empty-handed."

The men lost no time in deciding what to do. They were unanimous in their desire to get back to where there would be safety, if not peace of mind. As Harry Tate put it for all:

"We'd rather face the frustrated howls of our sponsors than to vanish into thin air."

"Quite right, quite right," Kraskov's thin pipe rose. "The next expedition must take into consideration the mysterious rays which exist in outer space and devise adequate protection against them. Have a disintegrating effect upon animate matter, you know." He stopped suddenly, and his face twisted in dismay. "But my device! I won't get a chance to try it out! Which reminds me!" he yelled. "I forgot to shut it off. I'll bet the tubes are half burned out by now." He scurried from the Lounge, muttering anxiously.

Harry Tate gazed after the old physicist in disgust. "Him and his junk heaps! The whole Universe could explode and he wouldn't give a damn as long as he had one of his contraptions to keep him occupied."

Evers turned to Mike Blount and the crew.

"All right, go to your stations and stand by for orders. Ash is taking a rest, so I'll have to plot the course for the return trip. The devil of it is that we're already past the orbit of

Neptune."

Evers was weary and heavy-headed when he finally completed the new course. He turned to the inter-ship communicator and signalled for Mike Blount. There was no response. Lines leaping deeper into his face, Evers repeated the summons more urgently.

The voice of one of the crew—Burney—blared abruptly from the speaker.

"Captain Evers!"

"Yes—but where's Blount?"

"The engineer's gone, sir!"

Evers didn't say anything. There was nothing he could find to say. His face grew several shades grayer. At last:

"Burney, is there anyone among you who can take over Mike Blount's duties?"

There was a pause.

"Yes, sir, Finch says he can."

"Good! Tell him to prepare for orders. The rest of you return to your posts and stand by. We've got to work fast now."

Evers' lips were set tightly. If Kraskov's theory of mysterious space rays were true, and if Ash's idea of their increasing intensity were also, then the ship must now be entering an area dense with the deadly radiations. It was imperative that the vessel be turned around at once, or else everyone aboard would be wiped out almost at one stroke.

EVERS sent the first of his orders down to the engine room, and touched the activator key to the right lateral jets. But there was no humming response of power.

"Finch! Good Lord, man, don't you know what to do?"

"I . . . I do, sir. But the engines won't work. They're dead!"

Evers released a strange expletive and dashed from the control room. He

found Finch, Burney, Sharp, and Henkel grouped white-faced around an uncovered engine housing.

"Who took that hood off?" he demanded.

Sharp volunteered, "The engineer did, sir. He was doing something to this engine section when he disappeared."

"And that's why I think the engines went dead, sir," Finch put in. "Mr. Blount was probably adjusting the delicate relays leading from the electron pan, and when he vanished all of a sudden, he sort of left things hanging in air. The entire system is fused, and none of the engines will work until we get this section fixed and connected again."

"Damn!" Evers muttered softly. "And all the time we'll be getting deeper into—" He broke off, muscles bunching around his mouth. "Finch, we've got to work fast! Break out tools and spare parts."

Finch hurried away.

Evers gestured at the others. "Come on, let's start getting these fused parts out." He began rolling up the sleeves of his uniform.

And then a sudden bedlam broke loose. There came a shout from some distant part of the ship. A moment later Finch burst into the engine room, his features wildly distorted. After him came Tate, looking equally disturbed.

Finch gulped his voice into action.

"Captain, it . . . it can't be—but George Creedy's back!"

"What's that?" Evers shouted. He gripped the other's arm in a vise-like clutch. "You mean to say—"

"It's true!" Tate affirmed hoarsely. "Creedy's back!"

"Where is he? Quick, man, quick!"

"General Lounge, with Ying. We found him in the passageway leading to the Lounge."

With the others close at his heels, Evers catapulted from the room. Creedy was seated in one of the chairs near the entrance of the Lounge. Bending over him, a container of water in his hand, was Frank Ying.

The astronomer looked around as they burst into the room. He said:

"There seems to be something wrong with Creedy, Captain. He is not normal somehow."

Evers peered closely at the mysteriously returned chemist. Creedy was reclining bonelessly in the chair. His features were lax and expressionless. Evers took him by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

"Creedy!" he rapped. "Can you hear me? Look at me!"

The chemist's eyes rose slowly, to rest, dull and unfocussed, on Evers' face.

"Where have you been?" Evers demanded.

A glow crept into Creedy's eyes. His mouth worked. Abruptly, his voice gurgled into audibility.

"Captain—"

BUT before Creedy could complete what he intended to say, he began to blur into grayness. His figure dimmed, thinned like mist in a breeze, and—was gone.

Creedy had vanished again.

Evers clenched his empty hands and slowly straightened up. His eyes were narrowed upon the vacant chair.

"Creedy tried to tell me something," he muttered. "I wonder if he—" His voice trailed off into thoughtful silence. "Well, this spells finis for Kraskov's theory," he remarked presently. "I can believe in unknown space rays disintegrating organic matter—but not in putting it back together again."

"Kraskov's theories seldom work any better than his gadgets do," Tate

growled.

Evers glanced at Tate sharply. "Enough of this!" he said with sudden impatience. He gestured to Finch and the other three of the crew. "Come on, we've got a job to finish. Might as well do it while we're still present and sane." With the men following, he strode deep in thought to the control room.

And there, leaning weakly against one of the engine housings, he found Buck Geary.

Evers closed his eyes and took a deep breath. There were assorted gasps from the crew members.

When Evers opened his eyes, Geary was still there. He walked over to the technician slowly, expecting him to evaporate any second.

Geary looked up, his eyes wide and staring. "Huh? Cap'n Eversh?" He swallowed, reached out a trembling hand, and touched Evers' sleeve. "Cap—cryshtal men on Pluto. . . . They . . . they don't wan' us come and exshplore. They make vanish—to scare us away. . . ." Geary's face slackened. He slumped quietly to the floor.

Evers stared down at the sprawled form of the technician, his thoughts whirling in chaos. An icy hand seemed to close around him.

"We can't turn back!" Henkel screamed. "We won't be able to fix the engines in time. We're doomed, do you hear? We're doomed!"

Evers whirled on him. "Stop that, damn you! Whatever happens, we can't allow ourselves to crack up. Get a grip on yourself, man." He bent and felt for Geary's pulse. It was beating, faintly, but steadily. The technician wasn't dead, as he had feared, but had merely passed out.

Evers rose to his feet, indicating Sharp and Burney. He ordered, "You two carry him up to General Lounge and tell Tate and Ying to take care of

him. Finch, you and Henkel start taking the fused parts from the damaged engine. And hurry!"

Just then the inter-ship communicator buzzed. Evers made contact.

"Captain Evers speaking. What is it?"

The voice that responded made Evers reel, hardened as he was already to the mad incredible events that had taken place.

"This is Bud Sedden, Captain. What wrong anyway? The instruments show that we're already past the orbit of Neptune when we should be just approaching that of Uranus. And where's my co-pilot, Pete Ash? He was here in the control room just a moment ago."

Evers' eyes were flaming slits. "Never mind all that," he replied. "You've been in the control room all the time?"

"Yes, sir, but it seems as though—"

"And you know nothing about beings on Pluto who are trying to scare the expedition away?"

"Why, *nô*, sir! Say—what is wrong, Captain?"

"I haven't time to explain," Evers answered. "Go down to General Lounge. You'll find out what you want to know from the men there."

Evers switched off the communicator, turning in time to see Sharp and Burney return to the control room.

"LOOK at this, sir," Sharp requested.

"It fell out of Geary's pocket as we were carrying him up to the Lounge. I've never seen anything like this, and thought it suspicious what with Geary talking about crystal men on Pluto."

"Let me see it," Evers demanded quickly. He examined the object which Sharp dropped into his hand. It was a transparent oblong, a little larger than the size of a watch. Peering at it closely, Evers could make out a delicate and complicated internal mechanism.

His forehead wrinkled into a frown of perplexity.

"Never saw anything like this before myself," he muttered. "Wonder why Geary was carrying—" He tensed and an expression of discovery flashed over his face. "Say! I believe—"

Burney released a sudden yell.

Evers whirled.

Mike Blount took on solidity and bent over the fused engine section. Abruptly he stiffened and his eyes grew wide.

"What the hell!" How did this happen?"

"Hello, Mike," Evers said weakly. "Welcome back to the fold."

Mike Blount gazed around him uncomprehendingly. Then his jaw dropped. He gasped:

"Hub—you mean I've been gone—*vanished*?"

"Right," said Evers. "And—ah—do you happen to know anything about crystal men on Pluto?"

"Hell no, Cap!"

"Interesting," Evers remarked. "Mike, don't you remember anything at all that happened to you after you disappeared?"

"I . . . I just don't know anything to remember, Cap. After that speech you gave us in the Lounge, I came back down here to check over the engines. Pet Ash came in for a drink, because he complained he couldn't sleep. He felt rotten, and I had practically to help him back up the stairs. Then I returned to the engines, and that's all I remember."

"I see," Evers said. "By the way, have you anything like this on your person?" He held out the transparent oblong.

Blount gazed at it blankly, then searched mechanically through the pockets of his dungarees. He pulled forth an oblong of exactly the same

size and shape of the one Evers was holding. His face screwed up into a grimace of bewilderment.

"Uh!" he grunted. "Where'd I get this?"

Evers said grimly, "I've got some ideas about it, but never mind that now. Get the engines back into working order. I've got certain things to attend to."

Leaving the dazed engineer plucking absently at the rear hip pocket of his dungarees, Evers strode swiftly up to General Lounge. There he found Tate, Ying, and Geary gathered about Bud Sedden. They seemed to have been talking over the situation and comparing notes.

Evers held out the oblong in front of Bud Sedden and asked, "Got anything like this in your pockets?"

"Why, no, Captain," Sedden replied. "I've never seen—"

"Look anyway," Evers suggested.

Sedden did. He stared in amazement at the curious little transparent oblong which he produced from a side pocket.

"What . . . where—?"

But Evers was striding from the room, his features set in stern lines. He went to Kraskov's cabin. At the door he listened a moment. Then he gripped the opening knob and flung the portal wide.

THE scene that met his eyes was a totally unexpected one. Kraskov lay sprawled grotesquely in one corner of the littered room, blood oozing slowly from a cut over his mouth. His eyes were closed, and he was very still. His vibration device lay in ruins. Pieces of it were scattered all over the cabin, as though it had been the object of a vicious attack.

Eyes narrowed, Evers stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He crossed over to where Kraskov lay and felt for

the old physicist's pulse. He was rewarded by a faint but regular beat. Kraskov was merely unconscious, and a cursory examination of the old man's features showed Evers the cause. Kraskov had been beaten—with fists, as numerous bruises and abrasions indicated.

Evers straightened up, frowning blackly. "This just doesn't fit," he muttered. "Doesn't fit at all!"

Evers stood motionless a long moment, thoughtfully fingering his jaw. Then, abruptly, he stirred into motion. He began a fiercely intent search of the cabin. His quick eyes and quicker hands missed nothing. But he did not find what he was looking for, and shortly he gave up, shrugging hopelessly.

Evers turned to leave the cabin, but at the door he paused, halted by a sudden thought. He glanced once more at Kraskov, his eyes coldly speculative. Then, apparently reaching some decision, he crossed back to the prone form of the old physicist and went swiftly through his pockets.

Evers released a soft exclamation of triumph. When he straightened up again, he held an oblong identical to those he had found on the other men.

"Then it *wasn't* Kraskov!" Evers whispered. "That leaves only—" His mouth snapped shut with sudden grim purpose. Like a stalking wolf, he slipped from the room.

This time he went to Pete Ash's cabin. He eased the door open stealthily, but the navigator was not present. Evers entered, his narrowed gaze travelling over the room's furnishings. His eyes came finally to rest on Ash's spaceman's trunk. He stepped over to it, pulled it open.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Evers' exclamation was one of triumph and amazed surprise.

For the trunk held an incredible

object. It was a machine, bewilderingly intricate, yet exquisitely compact. The trunk itself, outwardly the ordinary kind in which spacemen stow their belongings during the long trips between worlds, served only as a camouflage for this.

DRIPPING to one knee, Evers made an eager inspection of the buttons, dials, and meters which covered the top of the device. Then something caught his attention. Placed neatly one atop the other in a compartment of the trunk were five oblongs. Evers needed nothing more to convince him that he had found the thing responsible for the disappearance of the expedition members. His eyes burning, he straightened up.

"Hold it, Captain!"

Evers turned slowly, his lean body rigid with shock and alarm.

Pete Ash gestured with the deadly little infra-beam blaster he held and eased warily into the cabin, shutting the door behind him. He darted a glance at the open trunk, lines tightening in his face.

"So you've guessed what it was all about?"

Evers nodded slowly. "I should have done so long ago, but things happened a bit too fast."

"That's the way I planned them to happen," Ash said. "I couldn't give you time to put two and two together. It's difficult to get away with anything in a place as confined as this ship."

"Yes? Then why the gun, Ash?"

"To kill you with, Captain. Oh, I'll get away with it, all right—because after you're dead, you're going to vanish, so there won't be any evidence."

"I see," Evers said. "You'll just plant one of those little oblong gadgets on me, then turn on your machine. Right?"

Ash grinned mockingly. "Right!"

Evers asked quietly, "Mind telling me what it is?"

"Not at all—since the information isn't going to do you any good. It's simply a portable Verdi Matter-Transmitter. The oblongs which you discovered on the men are enormously compact disassembling units, and that"—Ash indicated the trunk—"is the sending apparatus. You know how it works."

Evers inclined his head. "I know the general principles. Your machine simply disassociated the men into complex radio wave patterns. There being no receiver, these patterns were held in stasis, by a sort of magnetic attraction, within the metal walls of the ship, ready to be tuned in on at any time. It's surprising to learn that an ordinary commonplace thing like radio transmission of matter is responsible for the disappearances. I might have guessed it had I known that the apparatus involved had advanced so tremendously as to be made portable. In spite of all the great improvements which have been made, the original Verdi transmitter fills most of a good-sized room."

Ash chuckled softly. "This prodigy also contains a robot timing device. It operates automatically while I'm with the others, thus keeping me free of suspicion."

Evers shrugged. He began speaking slowly in a desperate play for time. His eyes missed no move of Ash or his weapon.

"Well, the whole thing is clear to me now. At the beginning, though, I really believed in yours and Kraskov's theories about the disappearances being caused by unknown space rays, because that seemed to be the only logical thing to account for them. The theories were exploded, however, when Creedy reappeared—only to vanish again a

short time later. Creedy tried to tell me something during the brief space of his reappearance. Could it have been that he discovered you slipping an oblong into his pocket?"

Ash nodded sullenly. "He was my first victim, and I almost bungled the job. I had to knock him out when he started making a fuss. It was touch and go, but I managed to reach the transmitter and start it before anyone found him."

Evers went on, "Then Buck Geary reappeared and after him, Bud Sedden. Geary must have been drunk when you planted the disassembling unit on him down in the engine room, while talking to Mike Blount."

"He was. Blount has a supply of liquor cached in the engine room, and Geary had been helping himself a little too freely. How did you guess it?"

"From his crazy yarn about crystal men on Pluto who were trying to scare the expedition away by making us vanish. I almost believed Geary's bit of fantasy—I was ready to believe anything. It was only later, when Bud Sedden and Mike Blount reappeared and denied knowing anything about crystal men, that I remembered the whiskey I'd smelled on Geary's breath."

"ANYWAY, with yours and Kraskov's theories contradicted, something else had to be responsible. The answer came to me when one of those little oblong gadgets—the disassembling units—was found on Geary. Sedden and Blount also had them, but neither knew what they were or how they had got into their pockets. The explanation, of course, was that the oblongs had secretly been planted on the men. That definitely implicated someone among the members of the expedition."

"I decided it was you, Ash, after

Blount told me of your visit to him down in the engine room. It occurred to me that your illness might have been faked, so as to enable you to slip a disassembling unit into one of Blount's pockets. I recalled, also, that in one way or another you were always in contact with the men who later vanished."

Evers wiped a trickle of perspiration from his forehead with a slow careful movement. No opening had yet presented itself. Ash was watching him hawkishly. In despair, Evers wondered how much longer he could keep stalling. He continued:

"The oblongs were too small to be entirely responsible for the disappearances. Harry Tate threw what seemed to be the complete answer in my face when he made a sarcastic remark about Kraskov's gadget. It dawned upon me that it might have been this, acting upon the oblongs, which caused the men to vanish. That implied you and Kraskov were in on everything together—Kraskov to operate the machine, and you to plant the oblongs on the men. This idea seemed to be supported by the similarity of the theories which you both told about mysterious space rays. I decided you might have made them up together."

Ash shook his head shortly. "That was the story I was to tell, to increase the breaking of morale. I wasn't sure about it, though, and at the beginning of the voyage I asked Kraskov if he thought there might exist in outer space unknown rays which might have a disintegrating effect upon organic matter. He replied that there was as yet no evidence to the contrary, and later he must absent-mindedly have given it to you as an idea of his own."

"I see," Evers said. "Well, I decided to arrest Kraskov and put a stop to the whole business. I was quite sure that he was the mastermind, and that his

show of senility was only a pretense. But when I went to his cabin, I found that he had been beaten and his device wrecked. I thought at first you both had fallen out over something—quite possibly the mysterious reappearances of the men.

"A search of his cabin, however, revealed no oblongs which would definitely have implicated him. On the contrary, I found an oblong in one of his pockets which gave every indication that he had been chosen as another victim. That left only you, Ash. I came here, to your cabin, and found that." Evers pointed to the trunk-concealed Matter-Transmitter. "I knew positively, then, that you alone were responsible for everything."

"Quite clever, Captain!" Ash lauded mockingly. "Any more deductions?"

Evers shook his head. His face was a gray mask. "The puzzle isn't complete yet. Why did the men reappear, and why did you attack Kraskov?"

ASH'S features flushed with sudden anger. "The babbling old nitwit!" he snarled. "It was Kraskov who ruined my plans. That pile of junk he called a vibration device accidentally acted as a receiving apparatus, tuning in on the stasis-held wave patterns of the men, and causing them to reappear. Creedy was an incomplete job. Kraskov must have set up a cancelling frequency shortly after stumbling across the one which brought him back.

"After taking care of Blount, I remained in my cabin for a rest. By the time I was up and around again, the damage had been done. Geary and the others had been returned, and you'd found out about the disassembling units. I realized that it must have been Kraskov who brought about the reappearances, since he was the only one on the ship who had a device similar to mine.

An inspection of his machine showed I was right. I knocked him out of him, and then kicked his junk pile to pieces. Planting a disassembler on him, I first went to see if the noise had been noticed—which it apparently wasn't. Then I returned here, intending to remove Kraskov. Instead, I found you."

"Which means the end of your activities," Evers said.

"Wrong, Captain—it's only the beginning. You're the only one who knows about the Matter-Transmitter and the purpose of the oblongs—and you're going to vanish. Creedy is where he'll never be able to accuse me. And with you and Kraskov out of the way, I have only to drop a few hints to make it look like Kraskov was doing the dirty work, and you found out about it, only to have something happen which made you both vanish, with the consequent destruction of Kraskov's device. As senior navigator, I'll take over your position. I have then only to order the expedition to turn back, and everything will be over. The men are completely demoralized, and your disappearance will clinch things so that they'll be only too glad to do whatever I tell them."

"One more thing," Evers said. "Mind telling me what's behind all this?"

"I do," Asb growled. "There's no time for—"

"What was the purpose of getting this expedition to turn back?" Evers broke in.

"Persistent, aren't you, Captain? Well, you know why we were making the hop to Pluto all at once, instead of doing it in gradual steps."

Evers nodded. "Of course. Faltronium."

"All right. You know also about the Faltronium Distribution Theory, which makes Pluto a regular treasure trove. Until a short time ago, however, we didn't have engines powerful enough to

reach Pluto. Then Keeley announced his invention of the Hypatomic Drive, and certain men realized that here at last was their chance to make themselves the richest and most powerful men in the System. They all fought to buy up rights to the Drive, so as to be the first to reach Pluto and lay claim to the largest faltronium deposits. But the bidding became so high that they couldn't buy the rights as individuals and had to band together in order to pool their finances.

"TWO groups resulted. The one sponsoring this expedition won. The group for which I'm working lost.

"But my group didn't intend to give up—the stakes were too high. They found a loophole in the contract which your group made with Keeley. You see, the inventor was shrewd; he knew how badly his discovery was wanted and refused to sell all the rights to it. The best your group could do was get a stipulation in the contract stating that Keeley was to sell plans to no one else until this expedition had returned. The catch is that whether or not the expedition reached Pluto, once it returned Keeley was free to sell plans to other bidders.

"My group decided to sabotage the expedition so that it would have to turn back. The problem of doing so without burning our fingers was a big one. It had to be done in such a way that there would be nothing which could be dragged into the courts. One of the men in my group, an inventor, came forward with the perfect solution. He had just completed an improved compact model of the old Verdi Matter-Transmission sets, which hadn't yet been made public. He suggested the story of disintegrating space rays, and I was propositioned to do the work. You know the rest."

Evers nodded jerkily. Tension was a tight-wound spring inside him. It was almost over, he knew. He asked:

"I suppose your cut will be pretty big?"

"Big?" Ash laughed gloatingly. "Why, Lord, I'll have as much money as I can spend for the rest of my life. But enough of this! I've wasted too much time on you already." Ash's lips pressed into a hard purposeful line. His finger began to tighten on the trigger of the infra-beam blaster.

Evers saw death coming, felt its icy breath on his back. He gathered himself for a last desperate leap.

At that moment the door to the cabin opened. In the act of firing, Ash whirled instinctively.

Bloody and disheveled, Kraskov stood swaying in the doorway. The physicist pointed an accusing finger at Ash. "You—" he began.

Ash's head swiveled in a belated return of attention to Evers. Simultaneously, Evers leaped. There was a sharp hiss from Ash's weapon. The beam burned a furrow along the side of Evers' chest. In the next instant he had the navigator's gun hand in a clutch of steel, twisted it violently aside. His other hand came up with the force of a driving piston.

There was a sharp *spatt!* Ash dropped leadenly to the floor.

Evers staggered back, pressing a palm to his singed side. "Whew!" he breathed. "That was close! I was wondering how long it would take before somebody came. I knew I couldn't keep Ash talking indefinitely."

"He hit me!" Kraskov accused spitefully. "He wrecked my vibrator! Months of work-ruined! Now my theory will never be proved."

"Don't take it so hard," Evers comforted. "You can play with that thing over there. That's the machine re-

sponsible for the disappearance of the men. See if it can't be altered to act as a receiver. Creedy and Hobbs still have to be brought back."

Kraskov swooped eagerly upon the Matter-Transmitter, like a mother hen discovering a long lost chick.

THE equivalent of two days later, ship time, saw conditions aboard the *Ad Astra* brought back to normal. Kraskov, after an intensely absorbed study of the Matter-Transmitter—during which he took it apart and put it back together again at least twice—succeeded finally in effecting the re-materialization of Creedy and Hobbs. A sudden bellow of power from the engines and a triumphant grin from Mike Blount announced the fact that the former were once more in working order. Ash was confined to his cabin in a morpholin-drugged sleep, which would terminate upon his return to Earth when he would face the harsh reality of a rehabilitation cell. And the members of the expedition voted unanimously to continue on to Pluto.

It was with a feeling of extreme relief that Evers later entered the control room, to begin the task of deceleration. Bud Sedden grinned at him, and Evers grinned back. He slipped into the adjoining pilot chair, then switched on the inter-ship communicator, signalling for Mike Blount.

"Engineer?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Are the engines trimmed for deceleration?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Mike?"

"Yes, Cap?"

"Er . . . any of that whiskey left?"

"A . . . a little, sir."

"Good!" said Evers. "Save some for me. In the meantime, stand by for deceleration. Pluto, here we come!"

THE COSMIC



DEFLECTOR

It's one thing to force the Earth out of its orbit, and another to force it back in again!

by
**STANTON
A.
COBLENTZ**



HIS FACE red with haste, and his blue eyes glittering, Dan Holcomb burst into the laboratory.

"Just look at this, Lucile!" he cried, flinging his hat halfway across the room, and almost dancing in his joy. "Lord! Look at this, will you!"

Lucile Travers glanced up from her Bunsen burner, and stared in surprise at Dan's six-foot bulk. She was used to her lover's flaming enthusiasms; but never had she seen him so beside himself. How boyish he seemed, with his lean, keen, studious face, and eyes that were all a blaze of youthful delight!

"There! Take a peep at that, old girl!" he rushed on, as he snapped out his wallet and displayed a handsomely embossed letter.

Her eyes popped half out of her head as she glanced at the sheet. "Twenty-five — twenty-five thousand dollars, Dan!" she gasped. "Why, it — it can't be real!"

"But it *is* real! Boy! this isn't any pipe dream, believe me! A neat twenty-five thousand—that's what I'm offered 'or my Deflector!"

While she stared at him dazedly, he

did an impromptu hop, skip and jump. She did not need to be told about the Cosmic Deflector—had she not been at Dan's side during these many months when he had worked at it? Had she not shared his enthusiasm at the Gravitational Ray Theory?—the idea that gravity was due to an invisible ray shot out by the electrons and hence was akin to electricity in its origin? Had she not believed, with him, that this ray formed a current, which, like electricity, could be bent, or twisted from its course? Had she not glowed at the discovery of the telurium compound—telurox, they called it—which, on burning, would send out beams that diverted the rays of gravity? And had they not, poring together over his plans, decided that it would be possible to alter the movements of the very planets?

All this was in the girl's mind as her eyes raced along the lines of that incredible letter. It was from Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine, a well known firm of construction engineers. And there was no doubt that it actually did offer \$25,000!—\$25,000 for all rights in the Deflector, along with Dan's services for a year!

"Who'd have thought it?" enthused the inventor. "Why, Bert Wilcox—you know, my old college chum—introduced me to Wiley only last Tuesday, and told about the Deflector. When Wiley asked me to lay the plans before him, I didn't imagine—"

He rambled on for a minute, then broke short. "But good heavens, Lucy, let's forget all that! It's not the Deflector I want to think about! It's you! You, Lucy! Don't you see? Our waiting—it's over now!"

She did indeed see. For three years they had been engaged, almost since the day when they had met as laboratory assistants here at Columbia

Chemicals. But Dan, saddled with the care of his aged parents, had seen no way out of a financial morass that might mean further years of waiting.

Down from her vivid brown eyes and over her lovely face the tears were streaming as his strong arms gathered about her and she pressed close to him in confidence and love.

Yet why was it that, even in this moment of their triumph, a gnawing suspicion crept over her, chilling her joy with a dull clutching uneasiness?

THERE WAS a look of steel-and-granite on Dan's ordinarily cheerful face as he came striding home. He had only a wan smile for his bride of three months as she greeted him at the door of their little apartment.

"Don't mind me, Lucy, if I act like a man with his last penny gone," he explained, after a moment. "It's those damned fellows Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine. Well, you know I've suspected they weren't all above board."

"What's the trouble now?"

He came close to her, and she noticed how red his face was, and how his arms trembled.

"They're worse than Hitler, that's what the trouble is! Want to make me their stooge, the crawling worms!"

He took a turn or two about the room, then went on, more composedly,

"Remember how I agreed to use the Deflector to pull the earth a few thousand miles off its course—only a few thousand, for experimental purposes! Well, now it's more than that distance off, and getting further every minute. This afternoon I put it up to them that we'd better send things into reverse. What do you think they did? Laughed at me!"

"I don't call it exactly a laughing matter."

"Believe me, it's not! That fellow

Wiley came up, with his horse-like face and black eyes that seemed to drill right into me. 'Listen here, old boy,' he said. 'I'll let you into a secret. We haven't any idea of putting the earth back on its orbit—not just yet! We'll let the distance widen a few million miles. We're going to raise hell on this planet—simply hell!'"

"My glory, is he crazy?"

"Not by a long shot! That's the terrible part of it. They outlined their scheme to me—enough, anyhow, to show it's the most diabolical plot ever hatched. Thought I would work with them. 'Never fear, you'll get your share of the swag, old fellow!' Wiley promised. What does he take me for—a louse?"

The vivid blue flames of his anger seemed to leap straight out of Dan's eyes.

"Well, what is their plot?"

"To steal the planet—make themselves a World Triumvirate, the dirty cutthroats! Their scheme is clever too, clever as the devil!"

By degrees he explained the conspiracy, so far as he knew it. Wiley and his colleagues intended to deflect five or ten per cent of the sun's gravity, so sending the earth several million miles farther into space. This would not be fatal, but would cause great climatic inconveniences, and would so alarm the whole world that it would pay any price to get back on its orbit. By that time the agents of the Triumvirate would be planted in every country—Quislings of the sort that can always be bribed by the prospect of a little power, a little notoriety. When the present national leaders had been frightened out of their wits, they would be willing, even eager to turn over the reins to the Triumvirate "for the duration of the emergency," in the belief that Hogarth and his fellows would

save the earth. Meanwhile the Triumvirs would establish a secret police. They would demand control of the armies, navies and air fleets of the earth. And they would win reputations as wizards who had rescued the globe—and so would gain popular support everywhere. By the time the planet was back in its proper orbit they would have it, literally, in the palms of their hands.

"Even if they didn't tell me all the details," Dan finished, "I could guess what they left unsaid. Fact is, they're nothing but a gang of hijackers, saying 'Your money or your life!' to the whole world. The worst of it is, they'll have us all in such an infernal hole that it'll be too late unless we act darned soon!"

"What surprises me," meditated Lucile, "is that they should take you into their confidence."

"Probably they didn't doubt my loyalty, after the way I've worked with them all these months. Besides, that fellow Hogarth made a remark I didn't like. Turning that beefy red face of his toward me, with a wicked twinkle in his racoon-like eyes, he said, 'The man who works with us, Holcomb, will have power and glory. But the man who works against us will be—underground!'"

There was a look of terror on Lucile's face as Dan went on, "Naturally, I made out to be on their side. Hope to heaven they weren't able to see through me!"

THE smell of burning, from the direction of the kitchen, offered Lucile temporary diversion. And when she had returned from her scorched dinner pots, Dan had come to his decision.

"Only one thing to do, Lucy! I'll go to the police at once. If they act in time—well, maybe they'll still save

the world."

Already he had seized his hat, and was halfway to the door.

"For mercy's sake, be carefull" she pleaded, distracted.

"Don't you worry, I'll do my best. Wait here for me, Lucy. I'll be back in half an hour."

Despite her appeals, he was already halfway into the outer hall. She was never to forget the brave, tragical look of his grimly set face. She knew that she could not hold him back; that she had no right to hold him back. Yet something seemed to rise up in her throat and choke her as the door slammed and she knew that he was gone.

A deep depression had settled over her when the specified half hour had passed and he had not returned. When the half hour had lengthened into an hour, uneasiness gave place to alarm. When an hour had been extended to two, alarm rose to terror. At last, after two hours, her dread got the better of her and she telephoned the police.

No! there had been no accident to a Daniel Holcomb! No! he had not come to the station that evening! No, sorry, but they could not send out detectives to investigate! "Don't think there's any need of that, Ma'am," the sergeant finished. "Chances are he met some old pal and went off for a drink, and just forgot the time."

But Lucile, as she put down the receiver, knew that Dan had not "gone off for a drink." Realizing that he had not even reached the station, she understood that her gravest misgivings had been justified. And then it was that, for the first time, she broke down and wept.

PROBABLY no one who lived through the summer of 1977 will forget the consternation, the terror that

convulsed the planet. It was in late May when astronomers reported unforeseen perturbations in the earth's orbit; and by early June it had been officially confirmed that we were off our proper path in space. At first the variation was slight—a mere few thousand miles. But with the passage of weeks, our distance from the sun widened until the earth was off its course by a million, two million, five million miles!

No hypothesis put forth by science could explain the occurrence. It was suggested that some dead, dark sun, from the depths of space, had caught our world in its gravitational pull. But in that case, would it not also have affected Mars, Jupiter, and the other planets? Yet these, except for minute variations ascribable to the earth's altered position, were unaffected!

But few persons, those desperate days, cared much about the theory behind the event. What concerned them was the peril to their own existence. Already the disturbances were acute. By mid-July, New York and London shivered in snow flurries; the frost had ruined agriculture in half the north temperate regions; while in the Argentine and South Africa, which were now experiencing their winter, hundreds of thousands were freezing to death. Meanwhile blizzards and tornadoes swept the globe; tidal waves; earthquakes and volcanic eruptions testified to the upset of the age-old equilibrium; while thunder storms of unexampled severity, floods, and meteoric displays of a brilliance never known before, added to the protests of the elements and the terror of the people.

Long before the summer was over, men began to resign themselves to the idea that life on earth was near its end. For, not only were we receiving less solar radiation than formerly, but the years and therefore the seasons

were being lengthened; hence the winters would be unendurably severe. As we drifted ever farther into space, an unlifting frost would settle over every portion of the globe, including the tropics; and life, frozen and starved, would disappear.

It was on July 15 that the world was electrified by an announcement appearing in newspapers throughout the world. A celebrated firm of construction engineers, Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine, had not only discovered the root of the trouble but had contrived a way to cure it. However, they would need the cooperation of every man, woman and child on earth; they must be given control of all the world's resources, of all mines, power-plants, factories, and systems of transportation, in order to throw everything that mankind possessed into the battle.

At any other time, such a proposal would have been laughed to scorn. But now, when the world's nerves were stretched taut with terror, men were eager to clutch at any straw. A committee of alleged experts (who, it subsequently turned out, were in the pay of Hogarth and Company) endorsed the claims of the self-styled saviors of the world; legislative groups, likewise in their pay, voted them unlimited power; dictators and presidents, in despair, gave them the right of way over great nations. But what did this matter? What did anything matter, except that Earth be saved from destruction?

IN A concrete-walled, electrically lighted basement chamber, originally intended as a store-room, a prisoner stalked restlessly. Up and down, up and down, up and down the ten-by-twelve windowless space he wandered. His eyes were bloodshot; his fingers twitched uneasily; his rumpled clothes bore the signs of a

recent struggle. At one side of the room, on a rude work-bench, some food and water stood untouched. From outside the closed doors, he could hear the obscene jests exchanged by two armed guards.

His mind reeled as he recalled the events of the past few hours; how three men, amid the fogs of twilight, had surrounded him as he emerged from the apartment house to go for the police; how one of them had clapped a gag over his mouth, and the other two had forced him into a waiting sedan. . . . So swiftly had it all happened that he could hardly piece together the successive steps of the crime in logical order.

Yet that the deed had been ordered by his former employers was manifest. His horror at their plans had been evident, much as he had tried to conceal it! Their secret police were already functioning! Undoubtedly one of them, eavesdropping at the door of his apartment, had overheard his remarks to his wife, which he had made little effort to subdue. And now that he was in the enemy's power, he would have no chance to thwart or reveal their schemes!

Contemplatively he gazed about his jail. Bare walls! a bare floor! Not a tool by which he might attempt to escape! The prisoner felt in his pockets—even his knife had been taken from him. He thought of his wife—and knew that she would be growing frantic. Yet, though he realized that the odds against him were thousands to one, he would not let himself despair. For a long while he leaned meditatively against a wall, his brows wrinkled, his glance withdrawn, as he pondered, pondered over ways and means to surmount his barriers. For upon his escape, he knew, the world's freedom depended.

IT WAS with the air of a beaten dog that, one afternoon in early August, Hogarth came slouching into his mahogany-paneled headquarters in the twenty-two-story office building he had recently appropriated.

As July turned into August, the earth's movements had become more erratic than ever. Even to the naked eye, the sun's disk had grown appreciably smaller. The Antarctic cold had begun to lay a white blanket over jungles beneath the Equator; while already the trees of the eastern United States had taken on the hues of October. No one who lived through those disconsolate days will forget the tragic aspect of our cities: thoroughfares almost deserted, and only an occasional business house still open; a handful of people passing, with wan features and drooping heads; and only one question on any one's lips, "When, when will it end?"

With the haste of panic, Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine had been granted everything they asked. They had been placed in control of all natural resources, all factories and railways, all armies and navies. They had been given *carte blanche* with the earth. All other rulers took orders from them. They were, as they had aimed to be, universal dictators. This tremendous power had been granted them, so that they might save us all, as they had promised. Then why did they not save us? men asked, chattering with cold and terror.

They might have had their answer had they seen Hogarth sagging into his office on that August afternoon. Rubbing his fleshy red face with an equally fleshy red hand, he dropped into a seat, and grumbled, "Guess it's no use, boys! Simply don't seem able to turn the trick!"

Wiley had leaped to his feet. His

horse-like teeth were unbared beneath curling lips. "God! Mean to say she won't work?"

"No, blast it, she won't," concurred Malvine, who had come in just behind Hogarth. "Haven't the two of us been slaving like teamsters, along with McBride and a whole army of engineers? That cursed Deflector has gone haywire! Why, I'll swear we diverted gravity enough to pull the earth halfway over to Venus. And what are the results? Nil. Precisely nil!"

Wiley stood regarding his fellow plotters in silence. An unpleasant smirk formed itself upon his lips.

"Well, don't worry, boys. In the long run, a day or two more or less won't matter."

"No, I'll be cursed if it will!" growled Hogarth. "Nothing in hell will matter if we die along with everybody else!"

Wiley gasped. "What makes you so damned cheerful?"

"Well, how we going to save ourselves? I'm putting it to you straight, old man. What if we are world dictators? We're doomed like every beetle and rat on this crazy planet. The whole rotten globe is going to freeze!"

"Afraid that's so," agreed Malvine, with a wry puckering of his long, fox-like face. "We've tried hard enough, but we've about shot our bolt. Frankly, there isn't any known principle by which we can get the Deflector working again."

For the first time, a pallor had come across Wiley's features. He was the scheming brains of the firm, but had not kept up on his science, and always took his colleagues' word on technical matters.

For a while, he remained silent, his saturnine face grave with thought. "By thunder," he finally broke out, "I'm not going to let myself die just yet—

not when I've got the world in my hands! There's one man who'll be able to help out with that damned Deflector."

"Who's your genius?" sneered Malvine.

"Well, who hut this fellow Holcomh?"

"Holcomh?"

"Of course. He's harmless now—hut useless—in his underground store-room. I'm for taking him out—under proper supervision. He'll know how to use the Deflector, if any man does!"

Hogarth's gloom relaxed a bit. "Good!" he approved. "Can't do any harm to try. We've got to make damned sure, though, he doesn't get loose or communicate with his friends. I'd a thousand times rather shoot him like a yellow dog!"

Wiley chuckled; and the hands of all three conspirators shot out in agreement.

DAN'S face was pale after his long confinement. His cheeks were sunken, and had the smoldering look of deep suffering. But there was scorn in his manner as he faced his persecutors.

"Yes, that's the story," Wiley was reiterating. "Guess we're not quite on to the ropes. If you'll work a little at the Deflector—"

Dan glared at his tormentors, his eyes kindled with a fierce blue glitter. His chin was outthrust, hut his manner was quiet as he replied, after a moment's hesitation, "Show me to the laboratory!"

Wiley arose, and prepared to lead the way.

"We'll give you one week!" he stipulated. "Exactly one week! By then, we'll expect you to show results!"

After being escorted blindfolded to a secret laboratory, Dan labored in-

cessantly. He would pretend to obey the Triumvirs, while actually doing all he could to oppose them! But in the beginning, he had to confess to himself, his position looked nearly hopeless. Eagerly he searched for some possible means of escape—some way of signalling the outside world. But two armed guards stood watching just beyond the only door.

His most pressing thought was to get word to his wife—not only to relieve her terrible anxiety, but to plot with her his escape. He had, naturally, been denied access to a telephone; yet he would not let this halt him. Deftly making use of the electrical gear and headphones of a half dismantled short-wave radio receiver which he had found in the laboratory, he set about to tap the wires in a remote corner where, he noted, a telephone connection had formerly been. Meanwhile he was careful to keep as wide a distance as possible between him and the guards.

To prevent them from hearing his voice when he had tapped the wire, he set a particularly noisy motor in operation close to the door. Then, trembling with eagerness, he spoke through his improvised speaking apparatus. To his delight, he heard an answering, "Number, please!" His tones were jerky with excitement as he gave his home number. But, a moment later, his joy froze within him.

Across the wire there came a sickening, "The line has been disconnected, sir!" And in response to his quavering inquiry, all he could get was, "No, sir, they mentioned no other number to call."

He was just about to give another number—that of a friend who might be able to supply information about Lucile—when he felt a heavy hand on one shoulder, and looked up into the angry eyes of his guards.

"None of that, young man!" bawled one jailer, while the other snatched up the telephone equipment. "I thought you were up to some mischief! Get back to work!"

Two rubber truncheons came down upon Dan's defenseless flesh as, with a groan, he struggled back to his bench.

AS LATE August shivered toward September, the world's state became still more terrifying. Whirlwinds rushed more severely than ever through the darkening skies; blizzards raged, and a mantle of white covered the northern United States; agriculture and industry had virtually ceased; and men passed their time in mumbling prayers, in making wild, fruitless studies of the heavens, and in the sodden forgetfulness of dissipation.

Dan, however, knew nothing of all this as he labored in his hidden laboratory. Working once more at the Deflector, in the desire to save the earth from freezing, he had made a discovery—one which, as he toiled, had darkened his face with lines of discouragement that gradually gave place to horror. And in the end he had sagged down, exhausted, with bloodshot eyes and drooping limbs . . . oppressed with a nightmare realization.

During the weeks of his imprisonment, the earth had moved millions of miles farther from the sun. And the strength of telurox, lessening with the inverse square of the distance, was insufficient to cover the gap. It was beyond his power to make up the difference. Unless a miracle intervened, the earth was doomed!

Nevertheless, was there not just the remotest hope?—possibly a chance in a million? If only he could gain control of a larger laboratory, with capable assistants, he might try a certain newly conceived experiment. But to

ask his captors to provide such a laboratory would be to put himself and the earth even more hopelessly in their power.

Instead, his thoughts kept wandering in another direction. If he could once get into touch with his wife, she might be able to help him! But where was she now? Somewhere in hiding? Or imprisoned by the Triumvirs? Yet if she were still at liberty, was there not a means by which he might still communicate with her? He recalled how, during their years together at Columbia Chemicals, they had worked out a secret code, by which they could tap out love messages on the walls. Could this code not be used over the radio? Could he not transmit signals over various wave-lengths, so that sooner or later—if she still listened to the radio—she would recognize his message?

At any rate, he would try. Hoping to ward off suspicion, he pretended to work at a Cosmic Deflector which, telescope-shaped and two feet in thickness, reached from floor to ceiling. Within this great tube he concealed a small radio transmitter which he had hastily contrived, out of the abundant electrical equipment of the Deflector. Its power, he knew, would be limited, but it could be heard well enough locally. By means of a device resembling an electric bell, he was able to transmit signals, on a dot and dash system. So rapidly did he work that, after a few hours, this novel broadcaster was sending out its rat-tat-tat.

His next step was to repair the half dismantled radio receiver. This task completed, he began to tap out signals, "Lucile! Lucile! Hear me! I am imprisoned by the Triumvirs! Follow my directions, and we may still save the world!"

Time after time—hundreds of times

—he repeated this message. Was he but playing a fool's game? So he asked himself as the hours stretched out; as the days dragged past and still no answer came. Was he not wasting his efforts while the earth whirled to its doom?

IT WAS on the fourth day of the experiment. Pale with anxiety and fatigue, Dan still tapped out his messages; still listened at the radio. Suddenly he stood up, with a start. What was that sound he heard? That answering tap, tap, tap? Three shorts and a long—three shorts and a long! In their code, what did that mean? "Where are you? Tell me, where are you?" Or had he counted the signals wrongly. In desperate eagerness, he stood listening. Now there came two longs and a short; then a short and two longs—

"Well, old man, how's the work going?"

Dan was so shocked that he leapt back several feet. Not more than a yard away, leering with a horse-like grin, was the face of Wiley! And just in the background, devilishly gaping, were Hogarth and Malvine.

Dan's first thought was that the enemy knew what he was about, and had come to mock him at the moment of his seeming success.

"Well, how's she going?" Wiley reiterated. "Any progress?"

With an effort, Dan snapped out of his stupefied silence. "Oh, she's promising very well," he managed to say.

Through the radio, with maddening insistency, came the rat-tat-tat of a message. It was impossible, under the circumstances, to record or translate it! The thought flashed over Dan that he had been tricked; that the message came from the Triumvirs, who were now enjoying his discomfiture!

"What's that damned noise?" Hogarth demanded, as if to lend confirmation to this theory.

Reaching for a secret switch, Dan snapped off the radio. Only a clever bluff, he knew, could save him now!

"Oh, it's only the magnified sound of the impact of the gravitational rays upon the Deflector," he lied, glibly, still hoping against hope. "In other words, the vibrational impetus of—"

"To hell with your long-winded explanations!" Wiley cut him short, impatiently. "What we want to know is, what progress have you made? Any sign of getting the earth back in place?"

"Time we gave you is about up!" said Malvine. "If you're not getting results, better turn things over to some one else!"

"Everything's in the devil's own mess!" sighed Hogarth. "It's hell on earth—people freezing to death right and left. By God! if I thought you weren't getting somewhere, I'd have you choked to death, just for the fun of it!"

"Well, as a matter of fact," fabricated Dan, "the Super-Detectonic rays are a bit slow in getting into operation. But you can't expect miracles. If you'll give me a little more time—a few more days, maybe a week—I'll promise you results."

A cold sweat had broken out all over him before he had explained, in scientific detail, just why he might succeed if given another week. Thank God! they had not suspected! Or had they suspected?—and were they only toying with him? In any case, they had, wittingly or unwittingly, broken into his experiment at the crucial point. Would he ever again catch the interrupted message?

His fingers shaking with eagerness, he turned back to the radio. But even as he did so, the sneer on Wiley's re-

treating face hit him like a taunt.

AFTER the first cruel shock, Lucile had realized just what was behind Dan's disappearance. She not only was sure that he had been kidnapped by Hogarth and his gang, but that any effort on her part to report to the police would result in her own immediate apprehension. Already her position was perilous — might the conspirators not finish the job by seizing her at any moment? There was nothing to be done, therefore, except to change her residence, without informing anyone where she was going. Then, in secret, she might plan to free her husband.

At first, however, no tenable idea came to her. Meanwhile, through her old professors at Merlin University, where she had been an excellent student, she obtained access to the chemical laboratory, and experimented day and night for means to increase the power of telurox. If it were possible to divert to the earth enough of the gravity that shot past it into space, might the planet not even now be drawn back to its orbit?

For weeks she labored, without results. She was merely one more discouraged person in a discouraged world, when at length a startling incident occurred. She had gone out for a hasty bite of lunch, and on her return she noticed that her assistant, young Dick Harson, was listening to the radio, as he often did, while munching at a sandwich.

"Well, anything new?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"Nothing but a crazy noise, like a telegrapher breaking in on the broadcast," he answered. "If it's still on, I'll show you."

He switched the dial. "There it is!" he exclaimed, after a moment. "Doesn't it sound just like a secret code?"

At first she listened indifferently, her mind preoccupied; then gave a start, for she recognized something astoundingly familiar. Surely, it was but an accident! It must be an accident that the succession of long and short syllables made sense, according to her old code with Dan! "Imprisoned by the Triumvirs! Follow my directions, and we may still save the world."

Harson was astonished to see how eagerly the young woman sprang from her seat; and how she stood staring, as if she had seen a ghost.

With the frenzy of a famished person finding food, she bent down to listen. For a minute she remained there, leaning over the radio with a puzzled look, as if she could not quite make out the message. Then, to Harson's still greater amazement, she dashed to the laboratory's short wave transmitter, and, beating together two bits of metal, began to send out a series of long and short sounds, similar to the signals they had heard.

By this time the rat-tat-tat from the other end had ceased. It was more than half an hour later, when she had paused to rest momentarily, that fresh signals came over the radio. A flood of tears rushed to her eyes as she made out the words, "Lucile! Lucile—it is I!"

"TAKE this down, Lucy! Bismuth tetrachloride in combination with the borium salt I just mentioned will have a catalyzing effect on telurox, increasing its activity fifty per cent—more than enough to bring the earth back to its orbit. So my experiments indicate. Try it out just as soon as possible!"

Such was one of the first messages that Dan tapped out to his wife, after a few explanatory interchanges.

"For God's sake, hurry! At any

minute those bandits may catch on!" the message continued. "Let me hear the results as soon as you can! We've just got to succeed, and trap them!"

Several days went by, while the signals still flashed back and forth. But Dan knew, as did Lucile also, that their time was short, very short. All too soon the week allowed him by Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine passed; all too soon the sinister three paid him another visit.

They found him still working at the Deflector, from whose interior once more a strange rat-tat-tat was issuing.

"Well," demanded Hogarth, "what success?"

Dan looked up casually. "Oh," he declared, trying to appear unconcerned, "as much as could be expected."

"What the devil does that mean?" snapped Wiley, projecting his ridged horse-face pugnaciously. "You promised results in a week. Have you had them? Can you put the earth back on its orbit?"

"If you'll give me more time—"

"More time, and we'll all be driven to our deaths!" stormed Malvine. "Not another day! No, not another hour!"

Wiley, who had been peering into the recesses of the Deflector, was fumbling in an exploratory fashion at its fittings. Suddenly he pulled a half concealed lever, released a panel, and let out a low whistle. "What in blazes is this?"

With an angry wrench, he drew out a mass of wires, bulbs and batteries. "Looks to me like a radio transmitter!" he growled.

All three men glared menace at Dan. He had foreseen and dreaded this very event. Confronted with the evidence, it would be folly to attempt a denial. His only course would be to try to turn suspicion in the least dangerous channel.

"Of course it's a radio transmitter," he admitted, quietly. "I'll be frank

with you — I was hoping to find a chance to get away."

Ominously the three conspirators closed about him. There was a nasty rumble in Wiley's voice as he decided, "Well then, you damned traitor, it's up to us to put you where you won't get away—not for many a good long day! We were cursed fools to place any trust in you!"

Abruptly he motioned to the guards. "Solitary confinement again — and a bread and water diet!" he barked. "Maybe that'll bring him around to reason!"

But even as Dan, bound and handcuffed, was being dragged off, he had grim satisfaction in reflecting that his persecutors could not guess the real purpose of his radio.

BY THE first of September, the earth was farther off its course than ever. Eleven million, twelve million, thirteen million miles! And every day the distance widened. Would its orbit, like that of a periodic comet, be lengthened into a long ellipse, taking it into the unthinkable cold beyond Jupiter or Saturn?

This was the question in every one's mind, when on September 2 a full-page advertisement appeared in America's leading papers: "\$50,000 Reward! For invention to counteract the Cosmic Deflector! All reasonable propositions given immediate personal attention. Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine."

It was on the never-to-be-forgotten third of September that the advertisers received their first applicant for the award. It was a young woman, of sad and earnest appearance; and the clerk who questioned her, perceiving that she had extraordinary information to offer, lost no time about summoning Hogarth.

"My name is Landers—Mary Lan-

ders," she introduced herself. "I was a laboratory assistant of Daniel Holcomb when he invented telurox. I have been trying to increase its power, and have had remarkable success. In fact, I come to claim that fifty thousand."

Hogarth gasped.

The caller went on to explain how, as a result of a long series of computations, she had mixed a small quantity of a certain bismuth salt with the telurox; and how this had increased its activity by more than fifty per cent. Fortunately, a huge Deflector had already been set up in the laboratory, for experimental purposes.

"Have you taken any observations today?" she finished. "If so, perhaps you've noticed that the earth is fifty thousand miles nearer the sun than yesterday."

"By glory!" exclaimed Hogarth. "That's just what Lasson Observatory reported, but I thought those fellows were all soused. Let's see! Got a model machine to show me?"

"Everything's over at Merlin University. If you'll just step into your car, we'll be there in twenty minutes."

"You bet I will!" agreed Hogarth eagerly, as he reached for his hat. "No harm looking at it!"

The young woman started toward the door; then turned back, as if on an after-thought. "Oh, by the way, don't your partners want to join us? I'd like to give a real demonstration, which it would waste a lot of good time and energy to repeat."

"Don't see what they've got on hand more important," muttered Hogarth. "Wait a minute."

From an adjoining room she could hear Hogarth's voice rising disputatiously. "No harm investigating, anyhow!" And she could not keep back a secret exultation when, after a time, he appeared in company with two men

whom he introduced as "Mr. Wiley" and "Mr. Malvine."

HAEF an hour later, she had led them into the University laboratory, a corner of which had been partitioned off. There a twenty-four-inch telescope-like tube shot up through the ceiling; while nearer at hand was a table covered with complicated electrical devices.

"Well, trot out your discoveries!" barked Wiley.

From a compartment Miss Landers drew three pairs of binoculars, with wires attached. "Adjust these, gentlemen," she instructed.

Automatically each man reached for a pair. And as they took them, a look of triumph crossed the woman's averted face. She pressed a button—and with what astonishing results!

All three men gasped, and began to writhe. A convulsive shudder shot through each; they sagged, and fell to the floor; then gradually all three stiffened, except for their necks and faces, which still twitched spasmodically.

At the same time, the young woman pressed a buzzer; and three men, in the uniforms of university guards, hastened in with ropes, which they wound around the helpless trio.

"What—what in hell's name is this?" sputtered Wiley, as he began to recover from the first shock. "We—we're paralyzed!"

"That's just it," stated the lady, calmly. "You're paralyzed, from the necks down. I merely wanted to introduce you to another little invention of your friend Dan Holcomb. He asked me to show it to you, with his compliments. You see, the rays of telurox, much diluted and carried over a wire, will temporarily paralyze the human nerve centers. But have no fear. The spell will wear off in half an hour."

"This—this is an outrage!" groaned Hogarth, as he lay amid his ropes.

"Not at all. I'm sure, when you're no longer paralyzed, you won't mind signing a little paper, containing an order for the release of Mr. Holcomb—"

"What the devil makes you so interested in Holcomb?" flared back Wiley.

"Well, it's only that I happen to be his wife. Mary Landers is the name of a cousin of mine. Dan and I have been planning to get him out of your dungeon when you locked him up there again, as we expected you would. I'm simply carrying out his ideas."

Angry sounds, like the growls of enraged bears, came from the throats of all three prisoners.

"If we sign," demanded Malvine, "will you let us go?"

"There's only one promise I can make. If you don't sign, my friends here"—she designated the three guards—"will see that you remain paralyzed."

The conspirators were trapped, and they knew it; were caught like rats in a corner, beyond rescue by the corrupt system they had built up. And so, after their paralysis had begun to wear off and they had been re-paralyzed several times in succession, they bowed their heads in capitulation.

"Come on," snarled Hogarth, "give us that damned paper!"

He glanced over the sheet, and an even angrier snarl came from his throat.

"You must think we're crazy, young lady!" he roared. "You can go to hell before we'll sign!"

The document was not only an order for Dan's release, but a confession of the criminal manner in which he had been seized and detained.

"Better think it over, gentlemen," advised Lucile, as the prisoners con-

tinued to hold out against signing.

AND this was exactly what they did.

After more than twelve hours, during which they were allowed neither food nor drink (it being impossible to digest anything in a paralyzed state), the victims realized that they had no chance except to sign, or miserably to perish. And not being of the stuff of which heroes are made, they grumblingly asked the guards to depa-ralyze them sufficiently to let them sign the paper.

Thus it came about that Dan was again delivered from the basement prison, and that he and his wife were restored to one another's arms. Thus, thanks to his discovery and her application of it, the earth was saved from the most terrible peril in history, and gradually was brought back to its true orbit. And thus, after Dan had broadcasted all he knew about the plots of the Triumvirate, Hogarth, Wiley and Malvine were discredited and disgraced, and, deserted by their confederates, stood trial for Dan's kidnapping and imprisonment. The last that was heard of them, they were still serving their twenty-year terms at Wilmott Penitentiary.

As for the Cosmic Deflector—after the earth's orbit was righted, the secret of it was sealed in a vault at Merlin University. "I've discovered, Lucile," remarked Dan, shortly after his release, "it's not a safe invention to entrust in human hands."

"But there's one thing," he went on, as his lips moved toward hers, "if it drew the earth out of its orbit, it also drew us closer together."

Her answering smile told him that, so far as they were concerned, the Deflector had been a success.

ENIGMA of the CITY



by

**CHESTER
S. GEIER**

**A new Earth civilization, free of wars,
was to be founded here on this new world.
So they staked everything on the voyage—
and found that it was already populated...**



"JOHN! Oh, John!"

The sound of his name being called halted John Reid in his long-limbed progress up the slope. He turned, knee-deep in lush grass, to see the figure of a girl hurrying toward him.

John Reid smiled and waved an acknowledging arm. He waited as she approached, wiping his damp face on the sleeve of his tunic. Once he glanced up at the green sky where Alpha Centauri shone in all its fiery splendor. The heat had been intense for days, and as yet there was no sign



of the rain clouds which would bring relief.

In another moment the girl was standing before him, her small bosom rising and falling rapidly beneath her simple blouse. Perspiration beaded the tanned oval of her face and darkened her auburn hair where it swept back from temple and forehead. She looked up at him with grey eyes that were clouded with anxiety.

"Hello, Susan," Reid greeted, in the quiet tone with which he always spoke to her. "I was just going up to the *Parsec* to see how Doug Lain's coming along with the engines." He gestured up toward where the slope levelled off to a broad and grassy rise. Here, limned against the green sky, rested a great rocket freighter.

"You shouldn't exert yourself like that," Reid went on. "This isn't Earth, you know, and we've got to take things easy until we grow accustomed to New Terra's heavier gravity."

Susan Carew brushed his gentle admonition aside with a sudden rush of words.

"Any sign of the auxiliary yet?"

Reid shook his head slowly; the admiration which had glinted in his brown eyes from sight of her died away. "None," he answered in a voice grown curiously flat. "I've got look-outs posted on high ridges at four different points. They haven't reported anything."

"John, something *must* be wrong!" the girl declared worriedly. "Steve should have been back in the auxiliary days ago. What possibly could have happened to him?"

"I don't know, Susan. But look here, now, it's nothing to get excited about. Steve probably just went a bit further on this scouting trip than he usually does."

"Yes—but even then he should have

been back before this! Don't try to put me off like that, John."

THERE was a moment of strained silence. Reid became suddenly aware that her eyes were searching his face. He looked away uncomfortably. He had meant to be reassuring, but from all indications something was seriously wrong. Steve Norlin had been gone eight days now which made him more than merely overdue. Reid knew that the scout always planned his trips with the exactness of a time schedule, and this delay might easily mean disaster.

Reid looked down at the tiny valley which lay at the foot of the slope, fighting down the weary bitterness which was flooding him. Steve Norlin. Always it was Steve Norlin. Was she blind?

His moody eyes came to rest upon the camp which lay sprawled down there in the valley, and something of calm and comfort came into them. It was a sight which never failed to bring him some measure of peace. Peace—and at the same time, unrest.

The camp was spread out with only the faintest suggestion of geometrical planning. At first glance, it resembled something that might have been built by a people whose degree of civilized development had just progressed beyond that of living in caves. It was crowded and noisy, poorly constructed, littered with all sorts of imaginable things, from tools and personal belongings to stacks of piled logs not yet trimmed for building. Completed houses, really little more than crude wooden shelters stood here and there, mingling with others just under construction, while in several places stood flimsy tents consisting of a length of cloth draped over a framework of poles.

Through it all, busily engaged at a multitude of tasks, moved a small band of some two hundred men, women, and children. These were John Reid's charges, the Arkites, as he had come to think of them, exiles as they were from a war-devastated Solar System. He thought in the same way of the *Parsec* which had brought them here to New Terra, not as the old, lumbering freighter it once had been, but as a great Ark bearing these last remnants of a once great species to a virgin world to begin life anew.

The Arkites had been in extremely difficult circumstances even while on Earth, and their present situation had been changed but little, save for the fact that the war which had menaced their lives had been left far behind. Their bodies were grimy and unkempt with toil, their clothing bedraggled and tattered. More than a few wore bandages about their limbs as mute evidence of their clumsiness and unfamiliarity with even the simplest of tools. They were thin, too, and had Reid looked carefully through the shimmering heat of Alpha Centauri, he might have noticed the sullen lines of discontent which were growing about their mouths and eyes.

BUT Reid did not see the crudeness and discomforts of the camp. Neither did he see the discontent just breaking into bud. He looked through the heat with a dreamer's eyes, and the vision he saw was one of glittering, sky-high towers and a people happy and wise in their greatness.

"You should have listened to Steve," Susan went on. "You should have had a radio installed aboard the auxiliary, so that if anything ever went wrong, we'd get to know about it in time to help."

The vision faded from Reid's eyes;

the old bitterness crept back. "It wasn't absolutely necessary," he responded patiently. "Besides, neither the time nor the materials could have been spared in setting up a radio system. There's no telling what kind of weather we'll be having on this world, and it's imperative that we get the camp set up and organized as soon as possible. Everyone and everything we have is needed for that."

Susan pushed back a stray lock of auburn hair with a work-roughened hand, her red mouth set stubbornly. "I know that—but it seems to me that in your concern for the others you might have a little more consideration for Steve. He's doing by far the most dangerous work of us all, and it's only fair that—"

She broke off suddenly; her voice softened. "This is a strange, new world, John, and there are so few of us here. . . ."

"Of course," Reid muttered. He bent down suddenly and plucked one of the spear-like blades of the grass that grew about him. He felt angry with himself, and a little ashamed. He knew that his face had gotten that look of a jealous, small boy as it always did when Susan spoke of Steve Norlin.

Reid frowned down at the blade of grass in his hand, running a calloused thumb along its serrated edge. Trouble was, he was almost old enough to be her father. Why, streaks of grey were already beginning to appear in his crisp, black hair. He was a fool for ever daring to imagine that Susan might be interested in him. An old fool.

Steve Norlin was young and handsome. He had all the necessary dash and charm. He knew how to act around women, knew all the clever and witty things to say. Reid felt his own deficiency in this respect acutely. He'd

been too busy all his life to cultivate the social manner. There had been so many other things to do. . . .

He tried now, as always, to tell himself that Susan didn't really matter. He was already well started up the path that led to final realization of his dream, the vision which had kept him inspired through the long, hard years. That was all that counted now—final realization of the dream.

But he glanced up from the blade of grass and looked at Susan, and now, as always, he knew that the final realization would be all the sweeter if she were there to share it with him. This small, rounded girl with her wealth of auburn hair and her cool, grey eyes was the embodiment of certain other dreams, of which up to the time of meeting her, he had been too busy to become fully aware.

"I've got to go," Susan said abruptly. "I've got a lot to do." She turned from him; her grey eyes refused to meet his brown ones.

"Of course," Reid muttered again. The bitterness crept from his eyes and hardened around his mouth as he watched her go. Her purposeful figure went quickly down the slope and toward the camp. Soon it was swallowed up in the general bustle of the Arkites.

REID stood alone upon the slope.

Up in the green sky Alpha Centauri was beginning to edge down toward its resting place behind the tremendous mountains that lay to the north. It was nearing evening now, with the swiftness with which days passed on New Terra. The heat still held, thick and oppressive.

Memory of his intention to visit the *Parsec* came back to Reid; he crumpled the blade of grass in his hand, then let it drop to the ground as though it

were a hope he was reluctantly casting aside. He resumed his journey up the slope, but something of the litheness of his earlier progress had gone.

It was not until he was several yards from the ship did Reid notice the lank, bony form of Doug Lain standing just within the airlock. Lain was wiping his hands on a bit of oily waste, and his long, seamed face was expressionless.

"Oh — hello, Doug," Reid said, faintly startled. "Thought I'd come up to see how you were getting along."

"I saw you talking to Susan," Lain said quietly.

"Why, yes. She wanted to know if the auxiliary had been sighted yet." Reid looked at the other with a trace of defiance.

"That isn't quite what I meant," Lain said. His features softened momentarily, and he gave Reid's shoulder a gentle punch. "Wake up to yourself, John. If she can't see that you're worth two of that Norlin Don Juan any old day, then she's not worth the trouble of running after."

"It's not that. It's just that she's young, and I'm—well, I'm pretty well along, Doug."

Lain threw the bit of waste aside with an abrupt gesture. "That makes little difference, John. I know she's pretty—but you want a woman who has a sense of values, too. Norlin's a slacker. You know we had to give him that job of scouting in the auxiliary because there wasn't much else he could do. And he's just vain enough to go around boasting about it. Danger, adventure—hell! The auxiliary's safe enough, and even in the event of a forced landing he'd be just as safe as though he were right in camp. We've seen enough of New Terra by now to know that its animal life hasn't developed far enough even to be re-

motely dangerous. Norlin's a trouble maker as well, mark my word."

REID nodded slowly; this last applied in his own case, at least. And more than once he had wished that he could find the necessary time to take over the scouting trips himself. Norlin was wasting too much fuel in searching for a site on which the Arkites could build a permanent settlement. There were any number of suitable locations which he might have missed.

But Reid shrugged these regrets aside; he turned to a more pressing problem.

"Have you found out what's wrong with the engines, Doug?"

Lain shook his head with something of disgust. "No results again," he grunted. "John, we'll never learn what caused that strange shake-up unless we take the engines apart bolt by bolt."

"I can't imagine what could have caused it," Reid said slowly. "I'm perfectly certain there was nothing wrong at my end. When the distance gauges showed that we were within Alpha's system, I began to cut power from the field in just the gradations indicated by our stress-relaxation formulae. There was nothing wrong with these; I'd checked and rechecked them often enough during the trip. The meters showed the propelling warp to be folding in normally enough. It was almost gone, when — *blam*. I thought the *Parsec* had turned inside out."

"Almost did—the old tub!" Lain growled. "I was tossed more than a dozen feet. Well, I guess the only thing that remains to be done now is to disassemble the engines. I'd never trust using them again without knowing just what was wrong."

They stood silently together upon

the rise. Except for essentials, there was little need for words between them. Their bitter struggle through the years had forged about them an unbreakable link of friendship.

It was a friendship which had begun at the university which both had attended during that turbulent last decade of the 26th century, when Earth and her rebellious subject worlds were rushing toward the brink of that terrible struggle later known as the War of the Planetary Secessions. It was a friendship founded on a mutual dream—interstellar travel.

To Doug Lain the dream had been one of finding a solution to the problem of crossing interstellar distances. But to Reid it had had more deep-reaching significance. He saw interstellar travel as the harbinger of a mighty galactic civilization, and, in its more immediate results, as something which would avert the conflict which then threatened.

All the habitable portions of the Solar System had become overcrowded; man's last frontiers had fallen before his restless advance. There was seemingly nothing left in nature against which to pit his wits. So he had taken the only other outlet for his restless energies—he had invented quarrels with his fellows.

Earth's colonial possessions, which had been satisfied with the Solar Federation for over two hundred years, had been clamoring for their independence. Reid realized that it wasn't really this that they wanted. It was new fields to conquer, new outlets, new resources. Given the opportunity to spread out to the stars, they would quickly forget their petty quarrel with Earth.

BUT the problem of interstellar travel was a tremendous one.

Somehow, a method had to be found which would enable the voyages to be made in as short a space of time as possible. They found the answer, finally, in Truman Varne's "Super-cosm" that vast and ingenious work which dealt with hyperspace as a higher extension of our three dimensional universe. Working from Varne's theory and formulae, they had begun work upon a hyper-spacial drive.

But they had hardly progressed as far as building the first small warp-generating engine when the war broke out in a sudden flareup of furious violence. In one stroke, Mars had seceded from the Solar Federation and taken over all Federation bases and Interplanetary Ranger stations within reach. A short time later all the other outer planets followed her example, leaving Earth, Venus, and Mercury facing a coalition of terrible, ruthless power.

Reid and Lain had worked feverishly while that titanic struggle raged about them. At first they had entertained the hope that the introduction of interstellar travel would bring about peace. But as the war progressed the hates and bitternesses between both sides became so deep-seated and virulent that they had finally come to the sombre realization that nothing less than the complete extermination of one or the other would bring an end to the conflict.

By the time Reid and Lain perfected their hyperspatial drive engines, the Earth had lain in ruins. They themselves had escaped destruction only because they had hidden their laboratory deep in a wild and unfrequented portion of the Adirondack mountains.

Only one thing had been left to do, and they had done it. In the *Parsec*, that old rocket freighter which they

had long ago secured as an adjunct to their experiments and within which they had now installed their hyperspatial drive engines, they combed Earth's devastated cities for the materials necessary for the start of a new civilization. From roving bands of refugees they had selected the best physical specimens of mankind still left, always on the alert for scientists, teachers, doctors, engineers. Then they had made a careful search for books, tools, food, and clothing. When they had gathered all of this available, they had departed for Alpha Centauri, leaving forever behind them the ruins and barbarism of what had once been a mighty interplanetary civilization. The trip through hyperspace had been uneventful enough, with the minor exception of the strange shake-up that had occurred when they had reached Alpha Centauri's planetary system and emerged once more into normal space.

DOUG LAIN'S dream had been achieved. But his was the soul of an adventurer who, having overcome one problem, goes forever onward to meet the next. Hyperspace still presented many mysteries; Reid knew that Lain would be occupied with these for many years to come. As for himself, his dream lay down there in the valley, with the first crude Arkite settlement on New Terra.

Reid's interest had always been in people. Not people so much as individuals, but people as a race, a civilization. His vision of an interstellar culture had long since tumbled into dust, but out of it had arisen something deeper and finer, more personal. It was the dream of a new civilization—one that had carved out its own beginning from the stubborn crust of a new and virgin world. Though he knew he would never live long enough

to see it reach the pinnacle of its glory and greatness, he found satisfaction in the knowledge that it would be himself who, with his own hands, had given it the impetus which had sent it upward.

The shadow of the *Parsec* was long upon the grass; the great, bloated disc of Alpha Centauri was almost touching the topmost peaks of the northern mountains. Down in the camp the first fires of the evening were being lit. But the coming of night brought no relief from the heat; it pressed down, thick and mostly humid.

Lain yawned and stretched his long, lean arms. "Well, it's food and then bed for me. I'll get back to work on the engines in the morning."

Of a sudden, he stiffened, gripping Reid's shoulder. "Listen!" he hissed.

A man's cry, dim and far away, had sounded in a signal upon the air.

"The auxiliary!" Reid cried. "It's coming back!"

Faintly at first, then louder and louder, the *putt-putt* of a rocket motor made itself audible. Silence had fallen heavily over the camp; the Arkites were standing like frozen statues among their fires, peering up at the darkening sky. In the west a tiny streak of flame became visible. It grew swiftly brighter until at last the auxiliary was circling the camp preparatory to landing.

"Come on!" Reid barked. He set off at a bounding run for the spot where he knew the auxiliary would come down, a charred expanse of meadow that Norlin always used as a landing field. The Arkites were already running in the same direction, their voices swelling into a clamor of excitement.

THE airlock was already open by the time Reid and Lain reached the

little ship. In the dusk they could make out the figure of a man just emerging.

Steve Norlin waved nonchalantly at the gathering crowd as though nothing at all had happened. His strong, white teeth flashed in a confident grin.

Panting, perspiration trickling down his face, Reid looked at the scout. In that moment he was struck as forcefully as always by the neat, almost immaculate appearance which Norlin somehow managed to keep up. His pilot's uniform was just as natty as it had been back on Earth when he was earning a living shuttling passenger rockets through the stratosphere. It fitted just as snugly, too, over his tall, lithe form with its broad shoulders and narrow hips. Norlin pulled off his flying helmet, and his bronze hair, just a shade darker than his skin, tumbled in curls about his forehead.

"Where have you been?" Reid demanded. "Why were you gone so long?"

"Easy, skipper, easy! One question at a time, please." Norlin held up a mockingly imploring hand. He dropped it suddenly; there was an eager cry of "Steve! Oh, Steve!" and Susan came running into his arms.

Sight of the two embracing was a raging fire in Reid's heart; he looked away, biting his lips. But as though under the pressure of something vastly important, Norlin cut the reunion mercifully short.

"All right, baby, save it for later. Papa's got news right now." He released the girl. He looked at Reid, then at the Arkites standing all around.

"Folks, the reason why I've been gone so long is because I've made a terrific discovery." Norlin leaned forward, his eyes glistening. "I've found a city here on New Terra!"

Silence dropped over the meadow, a

complete and utter silence. It was as though the air had vanished to be replaced by the chill vacuum of interstellar space, taking away all sound, freezing all motion.

The figures about Reid blurred crazily. A sudden, unexpected slap in the face from Doug Lain couldn't have stunned him more.

A city—here on New Terra! It meant that the planet was not, as he had hoped, uninhabited after all. The disillusionment was as bitterly keen as though some object of a life-long quest had turned to dust in his hands; for it spelled the destruction of all his plans.

Reid forced his shock aside. The Arkites had gotten over their own amazement at Norlin's announcement, and their voices now rose in an excited babble of sound. Reid could feel their eyes upon him as they watched for what action he would take.

He looked at Norlin. The words were difficult to form, but he got them out.

"Where is the city?" he asked. "What—what is it like?"

NORLIN grinned as though the question had called forth some mysterious inner satisfaction. He was facing Reid, but when he spoke, it was more to the Arkites who were eagerly pressing forward.

"Remember that great ocean to the west that I discovered on my last trip?" he began. "Well, I'd have no more than a glimpse of it, and this time I decided to go clear across to see what lay beyond. That spread of water is big; even with the auxiliary eating up the miles the way it did, it took me a long time to get across.

"This world seems to be made up mostly of mountains; the country I found on the other side was no better,

except that the peaks there towered higher than any I've yet seen. There wasn't much use in crossing them, since I'd have had to keep to the stratosphere most of the time where accurate observation would have been impossible. So I flew along the shoreline with the hope that somewhere along it I might find a comparatively level area which would enable me to get inland.

"It was a lucky thing I did, too, though I almost gave up several times. That shoreline seemed endless; I followed it for the greater part of two days. And then, suddenly, the shoreline and the mountains which paralleled it curved inward to form a tremendous bay, and within this, dim on the shores of its extreme end, stood the city."

Norlin paused, and though Reid knew that the scout's nature was not sensitive enough for a true appreciation of beauty, he could have sworn that a vast awe glowed in the other's eyes.

"Sight of it so startled me," Norlin continued, "that I almost lost control of the ship. I landed in a convenient canyon just within the bay, and then climbed a high ridge for a better look. The city is something to see, I can tell you. Even at that distance, it was a thing of soaring spires and mighty domes that gleamed with every imaginable color. And the location is ideal; in fact, it's just the spot I'd have suggested as a site for our own settlement.

"It was already about time that I started getting back to camp, but I couldn't leave without learning more about the city first. I decided to approach it for a closer inspection, without, however, using the auxiliary, since I thought it safest not to be seen. I packed a two-day supply of food and then set off along the shore.

"But I was fooled all the time; the city was much further away than it

had seemed. It was so big that its size had merely made it seem close. In a day and a half of almost constant travelling I got no nearer and so had to give up. I'd already been gone too long. But I did learn one thing—the people who live in the city are a lot like us. I saw a few working on outlying farms in the distance, and I watched them long enough to make certain that they are erect bipeds like ourselves."

Norlin gestured. "Well, that's about all. I returned to the auxiliary in the canyon and flew back here."

THE figures clustered on the meadow were very still. It had grown dark; Alpha Centauri had set behind the northern mountains, leaving only a few crimson streaks in the sky. The heat pressed like a blanket over everything. Somewhere the voice of a child sounded in a plaintive cry of hunger.

Reid glanced covertly at the Arkites near him, and suddenly he felt a sinking sensation. Their faces were dim in the dusk, but he could make out unmistakably the hope and eagerness which glowed upon them.

Reid turned back to Norlin. "In the morning we'll service the auxiliary, and then you'll fly me over to see the city. As for the rest of you, you'll remain here in camp and continue your activities as though nothing had happened." His voice was harsh and authoritative.

The Arkites woke suddenly back into sound and motion. They started back to camp, gathered thickly about Norlin, their voices making a din of eager questions. Reid remained behind on the meadow with Doug Lain, thinking with a detached bitterness that the ruin which Norlin's discovery had brought to his plans had, on the other hand, made the scout a hero in the eyes of the Arkites.

"What a rotten break!" Lain mut-

tered. "All along we thought we were the only ones on this world, and now, after all we've done, we find out different. A city! That means civilization, John—intelligent beings." He paused a moment. Then his voice sounded again. "Well, what do you intend to do now, John? This end of the affair was always more yours than mine."

Reid looked up to the stars which glittered in their strange constellations in the sky. His tones were heavy with weariness.

"We'll have to start all over again, Doug. You know that I've always wanted to do something with people as a civilization. Back on Earth, I'd hoped that our invention of interstellar travel would pave the way for a mighty galactic culture—but the war ended that. Here on New Terra I saw my chance to get civilization started again. With a settlement near all the necessary resources, with books and teachers, I'd hoped to give the Arkites one great push would keep them going forward for all the years to come.

"But discovery of the city has changed all that. The Arkites remember only too well the easy life they led on Earth before the war. Machines did all their work; the merest push of a button satisfied every want. Norlin's city offers many temptations—especially so since the people there seem to resemble ourselves. The Arkites would want inevitably to live in the city. Once there, they'd lose their identity as a race, become submerged in another culture. There might be intellectual differences, too, which would lead to war and death. No, Doug, we'll just have to leave New Terra. On some world circling another star, we'll begin all over."

"But do you think the Arkites will want to leave New Terra, John?" Lain

asked slowly. "The city does offer many attractions, as you've said. They've suffered a lot already, and they may not want to go through it again."

"I'm sure they'll see it my way," Reid answered. "They must have enough pride of race left to want to build a civilization of their own."

BUT Reid felt a return of his earlier premonition. For the first time he wondered just how far the Arkites would follow him up that long, hard road which led to a new beginning. He realized now that his dream could not possibly appear as rich and real to them as it was to him, so that they would make every sacrifice to give it substance. They lived too much in the present, were too concerned with the comforts of their bodies and the satisfaction of their petty desires to give their all for a vision as intangible as the very air they breathed.

Reid shoved these doubts aside for the present. He touched Lain's arm, and together they walked toward the camp, bright now with its supper fires.

Morning dawned with the sky as brightly cloudless as ever. The rays of Alpha Centauri struck down with a heat whose intensity was almost like the impact of something solid.

After breakfast, Reid, Lain, and Norlin began their task of servicing the auxiliary. Shortly before noon, they were finished, and after supplies had been loaded aboard, Reid and Norlin were ready to leave.

"Too bad there's no room for you, Doug," Reid said. "I'm sure you're curious enough to want a look at the city yourself."

Lain shrugged his bony shoulders. "I can do without it, I guess. Wouldn't be much sense in just taking a look at it, anyway." He looked significantly at Reid.

Norlin's head popped out from the airlock. "We're all ready, skipper. Let's go!"

Only a few Arkites had come to the meadow to see them off. The others had remained in camp where there was shade from the fiery heat of the sun. Reid took his place beside Norlin in the tiny control room and they blasted off.

It was one of the few times Reid had been up in the auxiliary, and he absorbed himself in watching the landscape crawl away far below. He said nothing to Norlin; the scout himself was preoccupied with thoughts of his own.

By evening they were within sight of the western ocean, and when night fell the continent they had left was far behind. The steady drumming of the rockets and the peacefulness of the star-strewn night through which they sped lulled Reid to sleep. When he awoke it was to see the sun edging above the watery horizon and lighting the sky with its first, feeble crimson rays.

Norlin pointed through the forward observation port. "We're almost there. You can see the tips of the mountains beginning to appear."

Reid nodded, then watched them swell into size. Soon they were within sight of the white sand of the shore, and Norlin sent the ship slanting downward to take up a course parallel to it. In the afternoon of the third day out, Norlin leaned suddenly forward in his seat, peering ahead tensely.

"The bay!" he announced, after a moment. "See it?"

REID narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sand. In the distance, the white ribbon of shoreline ended as suddenly as though cut by a knife.

"That's where the shoreline curves inward to form the bay," Norlin ex-

plained. "Great cliffs rise out of the water on the other side of the inlet."

Shortly they were entering the inlet itself. This was nothing more than a vast slit in the mountains which towered up fifteen miles and more on either side. Reid gasped at the vista revealed. The bay was a vast one, enclosed on both sides by sky-high peaks. But it was not this that held his attention. His eyes were fixed upon the multicolored towers and domes that glittered at the opposite end.

"There it is!" Norlin said. "Want me to land now?"

Reid took a deep breath. "No. I'd like to get as close as possible. Skim a hundred feet or so above the shore until we're within sight of the farm lands you spoke of. If you hug the mountain walls, we won't be seen."

Norlin sent the ship down until the blast from the underjets was churning the sand. He cut speed for a more cautious approach. Reid watched the city grow, every atom of his being concentrated upon the sight of it.

"There's the farmlands," Norlin said, finally, pointing ahead.

"Land, then," Reid answered.

Norlin landed on the shore close to the mountain wall. He and Reid left the ship, then climbed their way up to a convenient ledge of rock. They looked in silence.

Reid's face softened into lines of deep admiration at what he beheld. The city was like a jewel in a flawless setting.

It rested on a tremendous plain, within a semi-circle of titanic mountains. At its foot spread great farmlands, a vast patchwork of green, yellow, and brown. Mighty forests rolled away on either side.

The location, Reid thought, was not only ideal; it was perfection itself. The dwellers in the city could look out to the waters of the bay. They were shel-

tered and protected by the mountains. They had ready access to timber and ores. Reid felt a depthless sorrow that this could not be for the Arkites. He knew that even though a lifetime were spent to accomplish it, it was not likely that he would find another spot like this.

DOMINATING the scene was the city itself. It was still too far away for Reid to make out any amount of detail; but he knew the heights to which the mountains towered on New Terra, and from the way the city balanced those that soared into the sky behind it, he knew that it was very big. And from what little he was able to make out, he knew that it was very beautiful. His eyes followed the tracery of delicate spires and leaping arches, and he felt at once a deep sadness and a great respect that another people could build so well. He turned away, embittered.

"Look," Norlin said suddenly. "Let's go down there. Let's go into the city." His eyes were eager and reckless.

Reid shook his head with sombre slowness. "No. We can't do that."

"But why?" the other protested. "There's no danger. There can't be any danger. People who can build a city like that just couldn't be bad."

"No!" Reid said again. He faced the scout squarely. "Norlin, it's about time you awoke to the realization that this city is not for us. The people who built it have made real their own racial dream of power and greatness. We must leave them to their glory. It would not be fair either to them or to us to share in it. We are another, different race—and at one time a mighty one. We should have enough pride in this knowledge to build and achieve for ourselves."

Norlin's face was bewildered. "I

don't think I get you, skipper. Do you mean we're never going to have anything to do with the city or the people who live in it?"

Reid looked away, nodding. "And not only that," he said huskily, "but as soon as we get back to camp, we're going to pack everything into the *Parsec* and leave New Terra."

"What!" Norlin's shout was a cry of utter amazement. "But that's insane, skipper. It's positively stark, staring mad!"

"Nevertheless, it's the thing we're going to do."

"Now look, skipper, you must surely know of the hardships we've all gone through in camp. We're all soft—I might as well admit it. We're not frontiersmen, and haven't been for over two hundred years. That kind of life is killing us—and it will kill a lot of us before we get a permanent settlement established elsewhere." Norlin became desperately pleading.

"To space with racial achievement, skipper! It's ourselves, here and now, that counts—not those who come after us. They wouldn't appreciate it anyway. Down there is an advanced city, inhabited by people like ourselves. Why, all we have to do is walk right in and make ourselves at home! There just isn't any sensible reason for passing up an opportunity like this to go to another world and suffer all over again."

REID whirled on the scout, eyes blazing, his body shaking with fury. "Well, by all the powers, if that isn't the vilest bit of drivel I've ever heard." His voice became slow and concise with contempt and loathing.

"Gone soft? Gone soft, hell! It's just that you've all gone rotten lazy to the core! You've pushed buttons so long that you can't get your mental pat-

terns adjusted to any other system of behavior. You've actually degenerated to the point where you'd be willing to crawl over to another race on your bellies, whining for the food and shelter that you're too shiftless to obtain for yourselves.

"Well, I'll change that, all right! If you all have lost your pride and ambition, I've got more than enough for the lot of you. I said we're going to leave New Terra—and we're going to. I said we're going to build and achieve for ourselves—and we're going to do just that. And I don't want to hear another word to the contrary, understand me?"

For a moment Reid's angry eyes locked with Norlin's sullen ones; then the scout's gaze dropped, and Reid made his way down from the ledge and back into the auxiliary. Norlin paused to throw a last, lingering look toward the city. When he turned to follow, his brows were drawn together thoughtfully.

The return trip was made in strained silence. Shortly after noon of the sixth day, they were back in camp.

Reid found conditions in a bad way. The rains still hadn't come, and the terrific heat of Alpha Centauri had made its effects felt heavily. A strange fever had broken out in camp, and almost a dozen Arkites lay sick with it. The spring, which was their source of water had dried up, and now arduous trips to a distant lake had become necessary. Those of the Arkites who had yet the strength to move about were listless and dull-eyed, sullen.

Reid told Lain of what had taken place during the trip. Lain's bony face grew sombre.

"John, you'll remember that I've warned you of Norlin being a troublemaker. There's no telling what he may do now. Things have gotten so bad

here in camp that the Arkites would grasp at almost any opportunity offered them."

"What do you mean?" Reid asked, frowning. "You aren't suggesting that Norlin and the Arkites will go running off toward the city, are you?"

"Not exactly, John. Look here—wars have been fought over issues less great than the present one; the Solar System itself was destroyed over an empty ideal. The Arkites have suffered enough already. What you're asking now will mean sure death for a lot of them. You just can't expect them to follow you that far. Then what other course of action is left for them to take?"

"REBELLION?" Reid whispered.

His voice rose in a sudden burst of impatience. "But, good heavens, Doug, civilization is founded upon blood and sweat! They're to be expected; you can't built without them. Perhaps a lot may perish in the building—even I may be among them—but what does it matter, provided that something has been accomplished in pushing the race a step or two nearer toward its goal of glory and greatness?"

"I know that, John—but do the Arkites see it that way? Greatness and glory are meaningless to them in their present situation. What they want most is decent food and shelter, cleanliness and sanitation. They know they could find that in the city." Lain took a deep breath; his eyes dropped to his feet. When he spoke again, his voice faltered.

"John, I'm afraid that we've both bitten off more than we were able to chew. We thought we could play Gods with the Arkites, but we haven't been very successful. Not for many, many years to come could we provide all the comforts and conveniences that the city

offers now. Maybe—maybe it's best if we were to go to the city."

"Doug—you too!" Reid's cry was agonized, as though wrung with sudden, terrible pain. He grasped Lain's arms, staring at the other with wide, incredulous eyes.

And then his hands dropped to his sides. He stepped back, his face a hard mask.

"Doug, not even your doubt will turn me aside from the goal I've set for the Arkites. It's the right one and the only one, and if neither you nor they can see that, then you're only making things harder for yourselves. Because reach it we must—and shall. I won't permit a small thing like comfort for a present few to stand in the way of the future of our race."

"John, wait!" Lain held up an imploring hand. "I'm not doubting you. I was only suggesting the only alternative to the present situation. I followed you this far—and I'll continue to follow you, you know that."

Reid turned aside with steely purpose. "So much for that, then. We're leaving New Terra, and that's final. You and I will get to work upon the engines immediately. And as for rebellion among the Arkites in the meantime"—and his lips thinned against his teeth—"I'll take care of that!"

REID mounted the slope and vanished into the *Parsec*. When next he appeared in camp, the ominous shape of a blast-gun was strapped to his hip. Eyes widened at sight of the weapon, then grew narrow and vengeful. The Arkites gave way before him wherever he went, as though he had suddenly become something alien and deadly.

Reid said nothing in explanation as to the appearance and purpose of the weapon. His watchful eyes told him

that the Arkites knew. He gave terse instructions for the partial dismantling of the camp, and the packing up of tools and supplies. Then he started once more for the *Parsec* to aid Lain in overhauling the engines.

"John, wait a moment."

It was Susan, waiting for him just at the edge of camp. She indicated the blast-gun on his hip.

"Why are you wearing that?"

"You ought to know. You've seen the way things are shaping up in camp. Have you come to tell me that you wouldn't scratch my eyes out for the chance to go to the city and live a life of luxury and ease?"

Her grey eyes were dark. "Not exactly. But—but if I were to tell you that, would you believe me?"

"Believe you?" Reid snorted disdainfully. "Are you trying to make me think that you'd be willing to pass up this chance to get back to the easy life you've known—pretty dresses, perfume, jewelry—all the other things a woman loves?"

"Yes," she answered, very softly.

"Susan!" Reid grasped her by the shoulders, his fingers biting deep into the soft skin. "Look at me, girl! Are you playing with me? What do you mean?"

Her solemn gaze met his bewildered one. "John, do you know what I was before the war? A deb—a silly play-girl. My father had loads of money, and there was never a thing I had to do. I wasted my time in a constant round of wild, foolish parties. But the war and the life here on New Terra both have taught me something. I discovered a purpose in life, a reason for being. I've had to work and suffer with the rest—but, John, I've enjoyed it! For the first time in my life I was doing something real and vital. I was actually *useful*!"

"Yes, but I don't see—"

"Wait. John, I'm probably one of the very few here who really believes in your dream. I want to see the foundation laid for a new and better civilization. And I'd be willing to work for it, for I've found happiness in working, accomplishing. But the others don't and just can't see it that way. They've suffered terribly—more so, lately, with the heat and the drought. They know, if they left New Terra, that they'd have to suffer again—perhaps more intensely on another world. They can't take any more; they're cracking up now. And I can't bear it, John!" Susan's flow of words ended in a sudden sob. Her small face grew appealing; her lips trembled.

"I don't care for myself," she went on. "But I can't and won't let them suffer any more. They're whispering about revolt down in camp. Oh, of course, I know about it. And I can't let that happen, either, for it'll mean hurt and death to many." She paused; her grey eyes went dark again.

"John, I know how you feel about me. It's so obvious— Look, then, if—if I gave myself to you, would you take the step necessary to avoid further suffering, and possibly bloodshed? Would you allow the Arkites to go to the city?"

REID stared at her, numb with shock and amaze. "You—you'd give yourself to me—for that?" he asked huskily.

"Yes, John."

"But you love Norlin!"

Her eyes dropped to her roughened hands; her head nodded slowly. "But he doesn't enter into this," she said suddenly, looking up. "It won't make any difference. I swear I'll be just as faithful—"

Reid was a statue of stone to whom words were useless. Susan's head bent again, and she bit her lip while tears crept from her eyes to tremble at the ends of her long lashes.

Reid looked down at the bowed, auburn head and the small shoulders shaking beneath their soiled blouse. He knew a sudden, overpowering urge to take her in his arms and hold her close. But he knew this could never be, and he turned aside. The sad, sweet melody which played in his heart ended on a broken chord.

He started up the slope toward the *Parsec*, but once again the girl's voice reached out to hold him back.

"John—don't you want me?"

He whirled. "Want you! Why—" he choked back the words which would tell her of the love and longing that filled him the way rich, vibrant life would fill the city of his dreams. His face grew once more flint-like.

"What ever made you think that I would consider having you as more important than the future of our race? Building on another world, we'd preserve our culture and traditions. Living down there in the city, we'd lose our racial identity just as surely as though we'd remained in the Solar System and perished with the rest. Did you think I would permit that—just for you?"

"And did you ever stop to think for a moment that the people in the city might not welcome us with the friendly, wide-open arms that you all imagine they would? Have any of you actually been down in the city, seen them face to face, talked with them? They may resemble ourselves, but remember that this is a strange world, light-years removed from Earth. They may be so alien that they'd drive us crazy trying to understand or get along with them. Or, again, they might exterminate us

because of some idiotic religious, political, or economic reason—or simply because they don't like our smell." Reid made an abrupt gesture.

"Enough of this. As soon as Lain and I fix up the engines, we're leaving New Terra." Without another word or backward glance, he started up the slope.

AT THE top a sudden, chilly sensation made him pause. Wind! It riffled through his hair and whipped the end of his tunic about his shorts. It hummed in his ears and the scent of it was fresh in his nostrils.

Abruptly, the sky darkened; Reid looked up to see a great, black cloud slide across the face of the sun. And then the coolness was not only of the wind; it swept down upon the world like a warm blanket thrown suddenly aside. Great, dark masses were gathering in the east and sweeping toward the camp. Even as Reid watched, a lightning flash appeared in a sudden blaze of brilliance, and a moment later there was a roll of thunder like the rumble of an awakening giant.

Reid gazed about him, transfixed. New Terra was stirring into ominous, elemental life. The trees that grew at the farther end of the rise were twisting and swaying as though in torment, their leaves rustling like a thousand tambourines shaking in a palsy of terror. The dry, brown grasses dipped and rose like waves upon a restlessly heaving sea.

Rain! Reid ran the rest of the way to the *Parsec* and bounded into the air-lock.

"Doug!" he shouted. "Doug! Come here quick!"

When Lain appeared his long face was pale and strained. "I thought—What—" And then he noticed. "Rain!" he whispered. "Good lord, at last!"

They watched while the wind swooped and tore at them and the great, black cloud banks spread until they seemed to cover all the sky. Lightning flashed again, and again there was a shaking peal of thunder. It was like a signal sounded upon an immense drum somewhere in the heavens. Rain began pattering down in large, full drops, slow at first, then faster and faster until at last the water spread from sky to earth in an almost solid grey sheet.

"Great space, John!" Lain exclaimed. "All hell is breaking loose out there!"

Reid nodded, his eyes wide with appall. It was true; this was not the mere rain which he had expected at first—it was a storm of tremendous, terrible proportions. The wind had become a screaming, raging gale, the lightning crackled and flared almost continuously, and the thunder crashed and boomed like the death knell of a world. The very earth seemed to quake beneath the *Parsec*.

Reid stiffened suddenly. "The Arkites!" he cried. "My God! Doug, I've got to—" His face grey and twisted with apprehension, Reid started out into the storm.

"Come back here, you fool!" Lain screamed. "It's too late to do anything!"

BUT Reid was already out in the storm. He staggered forward a few steps and then the gale swooped down at him, smashing him to the ground like the vicious swipe of a titanic palm. It tore at him, actually rolled him over. The rain beat at him, pummelled him, blinded him. The din of the storm deafened him.

Battered, gasping, deluged, Reid fought his way back to the airlock. Dimly he was aware of others near him

in the storm, struggling forward as he was struggling. Then the cold metal of the *Parsec's* hull was against his hand, and he felt along it for the airlock. His seeking fingers met wet, human flesh; others, too, were seeking to enter the ship. He acted automatically, mechanically, numbed by the fury of the elements with which he was in contact. One by one, he helped them into the ship, pushing, pulling, his hands slipping on slick, wet skin, while all the time he fought to keep his feet and balance in the terrific gale. He didn't know how many there were; his senses had become too over-taxed for the registering of further impressions. There was a seemingly interminable interval while he labored there in the midst of the storm—and then there was nothing but blackness.

When Reid awoke he found himself inside the *Parsec*. That much of his first awareness of things told him. When he turned his head a moment later, it was to discover that he was lying on the floor within general lounge, propped up by what seemed to be a folded blanket.

The lighting and heating units had been turned on for this part of the vessel, and it was bright and comfortable enough, save that it had the stuffy, tainted atmosphere of a crowded room. And it *was* crowded, Reid saw. For a moment he had hopes that all the Arkites might have escaped the storm.

"John! Are you all right?" Someone knelt beside him. It was Doug Lain.

"Doug—how is everything?" Reid demanded tensely.

"I don't know yet. A little more than half the Arkites managed to reach the ship during the first full fury of the storm; you yourself helped a large number. They kept coming in

trickles after that. Some are still arriving, but we won't know the total amount of damage done until the storm is over. And that won't be long now."

WITH a sudden pang of apprehension, Reid thought of Susan. His eyes darted quickly about the crowded room, and then he slumped back in relief. The girl was bent over the reclining form of an Arkite in a far corner, tying a bandage. He had noticed Norlin, too, conversing with a group of men. Obviously, Susan and the scout had been among the first to reach the *Parsec*.

Reid thought of his own presence within the ship. He had no memory of having come aboard.

"Doug, how did I get here?" he asked, turning back to Lain.

"I went out and pulled you into the airlock after I realized that you had passed out. I was there all the time, helping you get the Arkites inside."

Reid grinned affectionately at the other. "Good old Doug! I'd never once been aware of it." His voice grew suddenly brisk and grim. "But there's work to be done; I can't lay around like this." He struggled to his feet and walked unsteadily to the center of the room.

"Attention, please! As soon as the storm ends, we'll go down to camp and pick up survivors. I'll want volunteers for that. Then several of you might go down into the hold and knock apart a dozen crates or so which we can use as stretchers. I'd like to have about three or four of the women go to the galley and prepare hot broth. There's plenty of emergency concentrates in the cabinets. The rest of you can search for such dry goods as are still present for use as coverings both for yourselves and the survivors.

Are there any doctors present?"

Two of the Arkites stepped forward, dispirited, weary-looking men whose clothing hung in rags. Each gripped a sodden and battered medical kit.

"Good!" Reid acknowledged. "Get some broth as soon as it's ready, then stand by for action." He turned and left general lounge. From the storeroom he gathered a number of fluorolite lanterns, later distributing them among the men who had volunteered for rescue work. Then he went to the airlock to watch for the breaking up of the storm.

Outside it was night. The thunder and lightning had gone, leaving only the rain and the wind. Gradually, the wind died down and the rain slackened from a heavy downpour to a light drizzle.

Reid looked at Doug Lain who had joined him during the interval of waiting. "Well, I guess we can go out now," he said slowly. His tones were somber with dread.

The camp, as revealed by the beams of the fluorolites, was a flooded ruin. Hip-deep water covered everything. Not a single hut, tent, or lean-to was left standing; all had been demolished in the fury of the storm. Objects of all kinds floated everywhere.

Little more than a score of survivors was picked up. Reid found these clinging feebly to the rocks which projected from the valley walls. They were loaded onto the make-shift stretchers and taken up to the *Parsec*. But for Reid and Lain the work did not end there. Already dead-weary from sloshing back and forth through the flooded camp and toiling up and down the slope, they spent further hours in first-aid work. Assured, finally, that everything immediately vital had been taken care of, Reid rolled himself into a blanket and fell into an

exhausted slumber.

MORNING came clear and cold. After a hasty breakfast of concentrates, Reid was once more down at the ravaged camp-site, directing the gruesome task of salvage. By afternoon, all the bodies of the perished had been recovered and laid out upon the slope. And now Reid knew the full extent of the damage done.

Almost one-fourth of the Arkites had gone down in that incredible and merciless storm. It was a total that stunned Reid, left him feeling desolate and bitter. His conflict with the Arkites over the city had made him momentarily lose sight of the fact that they were *his* people. He had been as proud and jealous of them as a mother hen over a flock of newly-hatched chicks. The loss brought a forceful return of this feeling, and his emotions touched hitherto unplumbed depths of sadness and regret.

The rest of the day was consumed in burial of the bodies and the recovery of tools and supplies. A tiny, temporary camp was also set up around and about the *Parsec*. Early the next morning, Reid and Lain went down into the bowels of the ship to begin work upon the engines.

Reid scratched his head ruefully as he surveyed the gleaming rows of warp-generators. "Any idea of where to begin, Doug?" he asked. "You've been puttering around for more than two weeks now."

"Well, I've got a hunch the trouble might lie with the relaxor-relays. We'll take off the housings and trace out the leads and connections of these first. Then—" Lain broke off, listening. His face jerked abruptly back to Reid.

"John—sounds like a lot of men were coming down here!"

Reid's face, already engraved by sorrow and suffering, grew deeper lines. "Let them come," he responded metallically. He loosened the blast-gun in its holster. The weapon had somehow managed to remain with him in spite of everything.

"John, you — you're not going through with your plan after all that's happened?"

"To the bitter end, Doug. My dream hasn't lost a bit of its reality."

Reid stood there, straight and stiff, while the pound of approaching footsteps grew louder. Cold flames swirled in the dark depths of his eyes.

And then men were pouring through the engine-room door. Norlin was the first to enter. After him came a compact group of grim-faced Arkites.

Norlin strode forward.

"Reid, we've come here for a showdown."

Reid looked at the scout. Norlin had been changed by the storm as all had been changed. His uniform was no longer neat and immaculate; it was wrinkled and torn. His irrepressible grin was gone, as was the carefree light in his eyes. His face was set, ominously purposeful.

"We know why you both are here," Norlin went on. "You've come to overhaul the engines to take us away from New Terra. Well, we're not going. We've made up our minds—we're going to the city. And you're going to take us there in the *Parsec*. What you do after that, none of us cares."

"This is mutiny!" Reid whispered fiercely.

"Make of it what you will! We refuse to follow you any longer. If you won't have any consideration for our well-being while you follow your crazy plans, then we'll have to look out for ourselves."

"**WAIT** a moment, Norlin." Reid leaned forward, his eyes burning into the scout. "Aren't you forgetting something? Aren't you forgetting that I rescued you and all the rest from the hell that was left of Earth? What do you think your chances would be if you were there now—soft as you all are? Starvation, plague, madness—death!"

"By that very act of saving you, your lives have become my property. You owe me a debt of gratitude that can be paid back only through the strict obedience of my wishes and commands. Have you lost all pride and self-respect, become so degraded and without sense of honor or duty that you'd be willing to forego this debt for the life of luxury and ease which you imagine the city holds for you?" Reid's bitterly accusing gaze raked the Arkites, and one by one, their eyes dropped before his.

"Don't be fools!" Norlin's voice lashed at them. "I'll admit he saved us, but does this fact make us his slaves? Are we going to be led around by our noses, made to suffer and die, because of a debt? The storm gave you all a sample of what to expect if you keep on following him. Do you want more of that?" He whirled back to Reid.

"You're mad to exact such payment from us! Your whole plan of leaving New Terra after all that's happened is insane. We can owe no debt of gratitude to a madman—we cannot be expected to follow him, either."

"Madman!" Reid was coldly furious. "Is this the only interpretation which you can make of my determination to leave New Terra and having nothing to do with the city? Then you are stupid, Norlin! Can't you see that my own personal satisfaction does not enter into it? Can't you see that the

comfort and safety of the Arkites is of no importance whatsoever? It's the future of our race that counts. Everything I've done and intend to do has been meant for your children and your children's children. If you can't see that, then you're the ones who are mad!" Suddenly all anger left Reid; he became desperately earnest.

"**MEN**, you've just got to understand that your intention of going to the city is wrong—terribly wrong. It's an unforgivable expression of weakness and cowardice. You'll be making beggars of yourselves, parasites upon another race. You'll be destroying the last hope of a once mighty civilization. What sort of chances do you think your children will have, living among an alien people? And, for that matter, what do you think your own chances will be? You don't know a single thing about the people in the city. You can't be certain whether you'll be welcomed or killed outright."

"We've discussed that, Reid," Norlin said coldly. "We're certain we can take care of ourselves." He made a gesture of sudden impatience. "I've had enough of this! We've made up our minds and nothing's going to change them. After the storm, we'd risk anything rather than go further. For the last time, are you going to take us to the city?"

Showdown had come, Reid knew. Both pleading and reasoning had failed; there was but one response to make now. Norlin's jaw muscles were clenched whitely, his body taut as a spring wound for instant, furious action. The grimly determined Arkites behind him were making a slow, almost imperceptible movement forward.

"Do you know what my answer is?" Reid snapped. "*This!*" His hand flashed to the holster at his hip, pull-

ing the blast-gun free. As straight and steady as though set in rock the weapon covered them. "I'll kill the first one who moves, I swear it! Now listen to me. Both sides of the matter have been presented fully by now, and by all the laws of common sense, mine still remains the right one. If you can't and won't see it that way, then there's only one—"

"John! Steve! My God, stop it!"

Reid's attention focussed involuntarily upon the source of the cry, his sentence left unfinished. An auburn-haired fury was scratching and clawing her way into the engine room. It was Susan, her face pale and twisted with terror.

Reid jerked his eyes back to the men before him, but the diversion caused by the girl's entrance, even though of less than a second's duration, was a disastrous one for him. The blast-gun was smashed suddenly from his grasp, and almost in the same instant the Arkites threw themselves upon him in a battering wave of human flesh. Doug Lain uttered a strangled sob and threw himself frantically to Reid's aid. But the attempt to fight back was futile for both of them, heavily outnumbered as they were.

For a moment only was Reid aware of pounding fists and clutching hands, of pain that flashed and roared. The next, he was plunging abruptly into the ebon depths of unconsciousness.

WHEN Reid came to, he found himself in the control room of the *Parsec*, seated in the pilot chair. He shook his head dazedly, and it was as though the action had upset a bucket of molten metal inside his skull, for droplets of searing pain coursed suddenly along the channels of his nerves. He winced and closed his eyes again, realizing with a dull fury that his body

was so bruised and battered that it was almost one, huge, continuous throbbing ache.

Reid stared hard at the instrument board before him, his eyes settling slowly back into focus. Then a flicker of motion caught his quickening awareness; he turned to see Norlin appear beside him. In one hand the scout gripped the blast-gun upon which Reid had pinned his last hopes of resistance—and failed.

"So you're finally awake, eh?" Norlin grunted. "Well, it's about time. We've all been waiting for you to come out of it. Everything's been packed into the ship, and we're ready to move."

"Ready—" Reid's lips curled bitterly. "You're in a hurry to see your folly through, aren't you, Norlin?"

"Perhaps. But I wouldn't call it folly. I've got this, remember." Norlin brandished the blast-gun. "Now listen, Reid, I'll have no tricks, see? You've lost irrevocably, and the least you can do now is to be decent about it. I'm holding no grudges against you; in fact, when we reach the city, you and Lain will be free to do as you please."

"Where is Lain?"

"Down in the engine room, waiting for orders. I told you we were ready, didn't I?"

Reid leaned forward and pressed the signal button of the inter-ship communicator. After a moment a voice buzzed from the speaker.

"What is it?"

"Doug, is that you?"

"John! Are you all right?"

"Well enough. Doug, hasn't anything been done about the engines?"

"Of course not. You know it's a two-man job. We'll never get down to the source of the trouble unless we take them completely apart, and then put them back together again, checking every detail against our formulae. And,

well—you know how it is. . . .”

“Norlin tells me we’re ready to leave at once.”

Lain’s sigh was just barely audible through the speaker. “That’s what I meant.”

Reid swung around to the scout. “Norlin, something’s wrong with the engines. It won’t be safe to move the ship until the trouble has been found and corrected.”

“You’re stalling!” the other snapped. “If you think you can make a play for time in order to—”

“I’m serious, I tell you!” Reid gritted. “Look. Remember that queer shake-up we had upon first emerging from hyperspace into Alpha Centauri’s system? Well, it wasn’t the natural phenomenon you all thought it was. Normally, the translation process should have been almost unnoticeable. That shake-up meant something was drastically wrong somewhere. Remember, Norlin, this isn’t the kind of ship with which you’ve grown familiar. It travels through an entirely different medium, upon an entirely different principle. We just can’t take chances.”

“Well, if another shake-up’s all we can expect, that won’t be taking much of a chance. Reid, I’ve told you we’re ready; we won’t stand for any delays.”

REID started to speak again, but a glance at Norlin’s stubbornly determined face told him it was useless. He turned back to the inter-ship communicator.

“Doug, have you heard everything?”

“Yes, John. I’m afraid we’ll just have to risk it, then. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t take a chance like this with hyperspace, but I guess there’s nothing else we can do.”

Reid’s features settled grimly. “All right. Stand by.” His fingers played over a bank of keys on the control

board. “Signals?”

“All clear.”

“Ready, now. I’m turning on power.” Reid pulled down a switch and simultaneously the instrument board before him lighted up. He depressed an activator stud and now a deep hum spread throughout the ship. He watched the progress of an indicator along the face of one of the meters on the control board, his hand ready upon a lever. When the indicator reached the stop, he pulled the lever forward. The hum rose to a shrill whine; there was a sudden sensation of motion—change. Another indicator moved and came to rest.

Reid turned. “We’re in hyperspace.”

“No tricks, now!” Norlin warned.

“Tricks?” Reid snorted contemptuously. “You’re in my power out here, Norlin, and don’t forget it. One wrong move upon these controls would kill us all instantly and horribly. But there would be no point to it; either here or in the city, the last hope of our civilization dies. I wouldn’t want to be the one responsible for it. Your own senseless determination will take care of that.”

Reid turned his attention to the control board again. He pressed a button beneath what appeared to be a large, concave mirror. This was the hypervon, a viewing device which served somewhat the same purpose as did periscopes on 20th century submarines. Reid and Lain had realized early in their experiments that hyperspatial travel would be useless unless some means of reference could be made constantly to the familiar guide-stars of normal, interstellar space. Almost as much as the warp engines, perfection of the hypervon had occupied their time.

Now the hypervon lighted up. In its

center, tiny, though sharp and clear, appeared the flooded campsite and the rise upon which the *Parsec* had rested. This was all that was visible; the outer edges of the screen remained grey and featureless, flickering weirdly with light and shadow.

REID touched the control stick and the scene changed abruptly. Mountain, plain, and forest appeared and vanished with incredible rapidity. For a longer time there was the deep blue of water. Then the mountains of the other continent appeared and swelled into size. Soon they were within the bay, and Reid cut their progress to a crawl, following the shoreline.

"Lord!" Norlin whispered, watching the hypervon in awe. "And to think it took us almost three days to get here in the auxiliary!"

And then the city appeared, a tiny picture of perfection. Just within sight of its outlying farmlands, Reid returned the control stick to neutral. He operated a series of switches and buttons, and gradually the ground below the *Parsec* as seen in the hypervon grew in size and detail. He took up the stick again, and once more they moved forward. Finally a road that gleamed with the hue of metal appeared on the screen.

"We're on the outskirts of the city," Reid said.

Norlin nodded eagerly. "Land here."

As Reid prepared to fold in the warp-field and return the *Parsec* to normal space, he paused, gripped by a sudden premonition of disaster. The trip thus far had been without danger, but he remembered that it was just at this point on the previous voyage that the shake-up had taken place. There had been no serious consequences, other than the mere fact of the occurrence, but he felt that a repetition might not

be so fortunate.

Suddenly Reid shrugged; he had nothing to lose. Everything had been lost already. He reached out to the control board again and began to draw back the power release lever, watching the meters and gauges on the instrument panel.

The field was folding in; the indicators flickered toward their stops. Reid held his breath tensely.

It happened, then, just as he had subconsciously felt it would. There was a sudden, ear-piercing whine that rose into inaudibility, became a vibration that tingled painfully along his nerves. The *Parsec* was shaken with abrupt violence, and Reid, clutching desperately at his seat, saw the hypervon flare with intolerable brightness. Simultaneously, there came the sound of a terrific explosion. Scarcely had the echoes of this died away, when Reid was thrown out of the pilot chair by a great crash.

Sickened, stunned, Reid groped to his feet. Across the room, Norlin was arising painfully out of the corner into which he had been thrown. Everything was very still.

And then Reid stiffened, paralyzed with sudden, chilling horror. He darted to the inter-ship communicator.

"Doug!" he cried. "Doug! Answer me!"

HE STRAINED his ears with the intensity of his listening, but no sound came from the speaker. He turned and ran crazily from the room, his breath sobbing in his throat. Only a very small part of him was aware that Norlin followed.

Reid reached the engine room to find smoke pouring from the door in thick, black clouds. The air was acrid with the smell of ozone. The interior was a shambles of destruction. Flame had

blackened and seared the walls. The engine housings had been blown entirely off and the delicate inner mechanisms lay scattered all over the room, blasted into fragments.

Finally Reid's eyes settled upon the charred body of Doug Lain. He walked forward slowly, his face a gray, lined death-mask. Everything became very motionless and quiet.

"Doug!" he whispered. "We could have gone on together, you and I. There's so much we could have seen, so much we could have talked about. And now—" Reid's voice ended brokenly. After a time he looked up. His gaze fixed upon Norlin standing woodenly in the engine room doorway.

"You did this!" Reid accused in low, terrible tones. "You killed him just as surely as if you had blasted him with the gun you're holding. If you had listened to me this would never have happened." Reid stalked toward the scout, his hands spread like talons. His eyes burned with a light as awful as the very fires of hell.

Norlin's face paled. "I didn't know!" he gasped. "I tell you, I didn't realize—"

Reid's forward progress was the slow and inevitable one of death itself.

"Reid, wait! Let me explain."

But Reid did not halt, did not waver. He came on.

Norlin broke; he released an inarticulate cry, whirled, and ran from the engine room. He fled as if every fear known to man since the dawn of time had suddenly taken on form and substance to pursue him. He had forgotten the blast-gun in his hand, had forgotten everything save his insane desire to get away from the hideous, consuming fire that blazed in Reid's eyes.

Like an automaton Reid continued onward. And then, suddenly, the supernal fury died out of him. Just at

the foot of the ladder which led to the upper deck he collapsed, crumpling slowly like a man grown abruptly old and weak. He lay there motionlessly, his head buried in his arms.

He had lost—utterly, completely, beyond all hope of recovery. His dream of transplanting civilization and watching it bud had failed. By now the Arkites were within the city, their first step toward racial destruction having been taken.

With Doug Lain he might have found solace, traveling in the *Parsec* to all the numberless, glittering stars of the universe. But Doug Lain was dead and the *Parsec* would never travel again. There was nothing left for him. Nothing, except—

"John!"

HE LIFTED his head wearily, mechanically. Someone was calling him. Susan. But what difference did it make? He had lost Susan, too.

"John! Where are you?"

A dim response of emotion stirred within him. Susan's voice was sharp and strained. Something was wrong.

He shook himself out of the numbness of despair. What could be wrong? He remembered, suddenly, having warned the Arkites against the inhabitants of the city. His eyes widened. Could the Arkites have been attacked?

Strength and spirit came back to him in a rush. He rose to his feet and climbed up the ladder. He gained the upper deck in time to see Susan turn a corner at the lower end of the passageway.

"Susan!" he called.

The girl reappeared, her face lighting in relief. "Oh, John, I've been looking all over for you!" She hurried toward him breathlessly.

"What's wrong?" Reid demanded.

"The city!" she gasped. "The

city, John. It—*it's gone!*"

"Gone?" Reid stared at her bewilderedly. Abruptly he whirled and bounded toward the airlock. Bright, afternoon sunlight poured down upon him as he jumped to the ground outside the ship. He looked quickly about him, his eyes widening with shock and disbelief.

Incredibly, amazingly, it was true. *The city had vanished!*

Reid stared in all directions, his senses whirling in confusion. The *Parsec* should have been resting upon a gleaming, metal road. Huge, multicolored buildings should have been towering before him.

But there was no road. There were no buildings. Reid looked out upon an immense plain, covered with waving grasses. At its outer fringes a great, dark forest spread. In the hazy distance, gigantic mountains soared majestically into the green sky.

Mountain, plain, and forest were as Reid remembered them. He turned his head. Yes—and there was the great curve of the bay, its waters lapping gently at the white sand of the shore. Except for the disappearance of the city, the scene had changed but little.

FOR the first time, now, Reid became conscious of the Arkites standing all around him. They were subdued and bewildered, their eyes anxious and questioning. Their glances fell before his shamefacedly.

"Where's Norlin?" Reid asked.

"He ran down there somewhere," one of the Arkites volunteered. "He came running out of the ship as though he'd gone crazy. When he saw the city was gone, he let out a yell and started running. We called to him but he didn't stop. After a while we lost sight of him." The man shrugged.

"He was a trouble-maker anyway. We shouldn't have listened to him."

Susan's voice sounded abruptly beside Reid. "John, are you sure this is the exact place where you and Steve saw the city?"

"No doubt of it," Reid answered. "There just couldn't be another place like this on the entire planet. And just before the accident occurred, the city was just beneath the ship, relatively speaking, of course. The field was almost gone, so weak that it just couldn't have moved the ship for more than a few feet."

"But, John, what could have happened? Why did the city vanish like that?"

Reid's eyes clouded with thought. "I think I know," he said slowly.

The Arkites gathered around him in an eager, attentive circle. He was their leader again. His words were something to heed, and they tried to show, like the children they really were, that henceforth they would heed them. They listened.

"Doug Lain and I built the warp-generators under terrific pressure," Reid began. "Almost from beginning to end, it was a constant race against time and the destructiveness of man. It was only to be expected, therefore, that some mistakes should creep in. Just what these were, we'll never know, now."

"In some way, our long run through hyperspace here to Alpha Centauri's system made these mistakes crop out forcefully. They altered the principle of the generators so that they produced a warp which allowed travel not only through hyperspace, but through time also. In what manner the two are linked I can only guess. They may interlock, run in parallel planes, or they may be one and the same thing."

"Anyway, in the instant upon

emerging from hyperspace into Alpha's system, the intensity of the warp-field was such that the *Parsec* was snapped through time. Instead of emerging at almost the same period that we first entered, we did so at one which I estimate as being approximately 500 years in the future!"

REID looked at the Arkites, and suddenly his eyes were glowing.

"Listen closely now. You all are aware of the fact that animal life here on New Terra hasn't as yet reached a very high point of development. This can only mean that the builders of the city were not natives of New Terra!

"Then who were they? They were intelligent. They resembled us. They built only *one* city, whereas if they were a race native to this world they'd have had hundreds, in addition to towns and roads. Can you imagine that a race capable of building a city like that wouldn't also be able to navigate the great oceans and spread out to the other continents? They didn't do so because of the fact that expansion wasn't necessary—there weren't enough of them to make it necessary. In the thousands of years that it takes a race to achieve civilization, could it be possible for their numbers to remain so few as to build only one city, inhabit only one continent?"

Reid looked at the Arkites. Their eyes were glowing, too. They *knew* now.

Reid went on swiftly. "When the *Parsec* emerged from hyperspace over the city, it was snapped through time once more, to the same extent as previously but in the opposite direction. We were returned to the point in time where we should originally have emerged. As a result, the city had vanished. It hadn't as yet been built!" His voice became deep and vibrant.

"That was *our* city! We are the builders! Through a strange quirk of fate, we saw the crowning result of our work—the work which we will begin now and which our children will carry on after us. Our civilization will not perish after all."

For a moment there was silence. Then one of the Arkites ventured timidly:

"Would it be possible for us to go back to the city?"

Reid smiled sadly. "The second shake-up not only snapped us back through time, but also strained the engines to the point where their inherent flaws caused them to explode. They're ruined, utterly and completely. Doug Lain, who might have helped me rebuild them, was killed in the explosion. I could never do the job alone in all the years of life left to me.

"No, we'll never be able to return to the city. Let us keep it in mind only as an inspiration. Our work lies clearly before us. The foundation for the city must be laid. That and that alone should henceforth occupy our thoughts."

The Arkites looked at the plain and the forests. They looked up at the sky. And Reid knew they saw neither plain, forest, nor sky. They looked through these things with the dreaming eyes of a race, and the vision they saw was one of glittering, sky-high towers and a people grown happy and wise in their greatness.

ONE by one, the Arkites went into the *Parsec*. The women came out with pots and pans and baskets of food. They began clearing spaces for fires. The men came out with axes and saws slung over their shoulders. They moved off toward the forests, and presently there came busy sounds of chopping and sawing.

(continued on page 73)

VISITOR TO EARTH

By
P. F. COSTELLO

The advertisement could have been a gag; but the Axis and a reporter thought otherwise.

I WAS sitting at my desk in the city room of the *Washington Chronicle*, glancing through the paper, when my eye landed on an advertisement tucked away in the bottom of the Business Opportunities column.

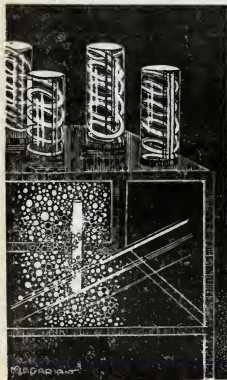
The ad was simple and curt; it said: *"Secret Weapon Available—Reasonable Contact Mart Shean, 2250 Constitution*

I took my feet down from my desk and began scratching my head. This was obviously a gag of some sort but, with the country at war, things like this just weren't funny any more.

My city editor, Williams, walked over to my desk with a copy of the paper in his hand. He was scowling under his green eyeshade.

"Have you seen this?" he said, shoving the ad section under my nose. I noticed that he had circled with blue pencil the same ad that had caught my attention.

"Yeah," I said. "Is this the first day it's been run?"





Williams shook his head. "It was in yesterday and the day before. All the papers in town have carried it." He tapped a pencil against his teeth and frowned. "What do you think it is, Mac?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," I said truthfully and cheerfully. "Apparently it's a gag of some sort. Was it phoned in?"

"Yes," Williams said. "I checked on that. I think there might be a story behind this somewhere. At least, a good humorous feature. Get on it, Mac."

He waddled away and I sighed and prepared to go to work. I sharpened a pencil, put on my hat and left the building of the *Chronicle*. I took a cab to the address listed in the ad. It was a small office building in an outlying business building.

I consulted the building directory and found a Mart Shean listed on the twelfth floor. That was my man.

The glazed glass door of Mart Shean's office was blank except for his name. I stood there uncertainly for a moment and then put my hand on the knob. As I opened the door I heard footsteps behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a tall dark man with a slouch hat walking toward me along the otherwise deserted corridor. The slouch hat obscured most of his face and my only impression was of a lean narrow jaw and full-lipped mouth. The man paused an instant when he saw me. His hands were jammed into the side pockets of his coat and he seemed to be studying me with peculiar intensity. Finally he turned and walked quickly back down the corridor and disappeared around the corner.

I shrugged and opened the door of the office. A mild pleasant voice said: "Won't you please come in?"

I looked and saw a small, neatly

dressed man sitting behind a desk in the corner of the room. The office was small and comfortably furnished. Sun poured in symmetrical slits through a venetian blind that covered the only window and there were several extra chairs arranged about the office. There was a rather large closet in one corner and its door was closed. From the physical appearance of the office it was impossible to tell just what Mart Shean's business was.

I turned my attention to the man behind the desk who was regarding me with bright pleasant eyes. He was small and frail but he somehow gave the impression of perfect health. Possibly it was because of the redness of his skin and the shining luster of his dark, carefully combed hair. His ears were small and pointed and his lips were slightly full. But his eyes held my attention. They seemed to be of one solid color, a deep grayish-green, and there was a peculiar suggestion of infinite intelligence in their depths.

"Won't you please sit down?" he said politely. His voice was soft and smooth and absolutely without accent. It would have been impossible to judge the man's nationality from his inflection or voice.

"Thank you," I said. I sat down, facing him. I was at a loss for a moment. There was something strangely disturbing in the little man's quiet stare. I said, "Are you Mark Shean?"

He nodded. "Yes, I am Mark Shean." But he didn't pronounce the 'k' and he slid the two words together. He continued to stare brightly at me. "What can I do for you?"

I unfolded the ad section of the *Chronicle* and tossed it on his desk.

"I came to see you about your ad," I said.

"Ah, that is excellent," he murmured. "Are you from the War Department?"

"Not exactly," I said.

He looked disappointed. "I was expecting someone from there," he said. "Possibly their representative will come later."

"Ah—yes," I said. "They're pretty busy over there now." I was beginning to feel slightly uneasy. The interview wasn't going quite as I'd planned. I was supposed to be humoring some nut or practical joker to get a story out of him, but I had the strange sensation that the shoe was on the other foot.

"And what can I do for you?" Mark Shean asked politely.

"Well, I'm a newspaper man," I said. "Frankly I was intrigued by your ad. I'd like to get the details of your secret weapon. You do have one, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm happy that my ad attracted you. You see I haven't had much experience with that sort of thing and I was afraid that I hadn't done it correctly. Since no one came to investigate I thought possibly that it was my fault."

"Oh, no," I said. "But tell me, why didn't you take this weapon of yours directly to the War Department?"

Mark Shean frowned. "I wasn't sure that that would be the thing to do. You see I'm a stranger here on Earth and I didn't know the proper procedure under the circumstances. I—"

"Pardon me, but—"

"Yes?"

I swallowed. The room seemed a little close.

"Did you say you were a stranger here on Earth?" I asked.

"Why yes," the little man said. "I've only been here a few days. Naturally I knew considerably of your customs before I arrived, but there are things I find puzzling. That is only natural, I suppose."

"Yes," I said weakly. "As you say, that's only natural." I took out my handkerchief and mopped my brow. I realized I was probably talking to the great-granddaddy of all mental cases. This guy was nuttier than a fruit cake. That much was obvious from his remarks, but his calm air of assurance and his baffling poise made me doubt the evidence of my ears. Maybe I was nuts! I'd toyed with that idea before, but this seemed a good time to think about it seriously.

"Where is your secret weapon?" I asked.

"In the closet," he answered.

"What does it do?" I asked inanely. I found myself thinking dizzily of the old gag about the two loonies and the hat. One nut asks the other to guess what he's hiding under his hat. The second nut says a horse. The first loony looks carefully under the hat and then asks, "What color?"

I was getting to that stage when I started asking serious questions about the potentialities of secret weapons in the closets of normal business offices. But the queer thing was that the little man's attitude of confidence and certainty made it seem quite possible that there *was* a secret weapon in the closet of his office.

"In your ad you said the terms would be 'reasonable,'" I said. "What do you mean by that?"

"That wasn't quite what I meant," the little man said, frowning. "I mean to give the weapon to the Government of the United States. The word 'reasonable' was an unhappy selection; another of the mistakes I can't quite help. You see everything is so very strange here."

We were back to that again.

"Your name is Mark Shean, isn't it?" I asked. "That doesn't sound particularly foreign."

The little man looked puzzled for an instant.

"Not Mark Shean," he said. "Marshean. You do not pronounce it correctly."

"Marshean?" I asked. "Is that better?"

"Much."

I felt as if I were getting somewhere. Why, I don't know.

"Now," I said briskly, "suppose you tell me something about this secret weapon of yours, Mr. Marshean."

"I will be happy to, but my name is not 'Marshean'," the little man said gently.

"But you said—"

"My name is Ang-Ar," the little man went on imperturbably. "'Marshean' is simply what you would call an adjective. It describes the place from where I come."

"But you said you were Marshean!" I said, bewildered.

"I am," the little man said firmly. "I am Ang-Ar, a citizen of Mars."

"Mars!"

"Yes. I came from Mars and I shall return there when my work here is completed. Why, is that so surprising?"

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure that I was close to the door. My little chum, despite his benign exterior, might be violent.

"No, that isn't surprising," I said in a nice soothing voice, "We've been more or less expecting someone from Mars to drop in one of these days. After all, there's nothing like neighborliness. Tell me, how were things on good old Mars when you left?"

"Everything was excellent," the little red-faced man who called himself Ang-Ar said pleasantly. "It has been many thousands of years since our planet has been disturbed by war and disease and famine. If you will pardon my saying so, you here have not

been so fortunate. That, incidentally, is the reason for my visit. We have long felt that we should pass along to the people of Earth some of our scientific developments. However, we have been afraid of disturbing your normal growth and culture. We agreed that it might be better to allow you to solve your problems as we have solved ours. But now that you are engaged in a vast and horrible civil war we feel that we must help those factions which are fighting the ruthless enemies who would crush out human rights forever on this planet."

I was a little dazed by the simple and powerful sincerity in Ang-Ar's quiet voice. The man might be as mad as a hatter, but there was something about him that defied ridicule.

"So you came down with a secret weapon to help us," I said weakly.

"Yes," Ang-Ar said. "I wasn't exactly sure how to proceed but I knew from my observation of your planet that advertising is one of the principal developments of your civilization. All of your commerce and business is expedited with advertising; so I decided to simply advertise the fact that I had a secret weapon. I have been waiting three days now and I was becoming somewhat discouraged. Do you think I have handled this matter in the correct manner?"

"Why, of course," I said reassuringly. "After all, if a man has a secret weapon to dispose of, the obvious thing to do is advertise."

Ang-Ar beamed. "I am happy to hear you say that. But I can't understand why the ad hasn't brought results. I expected some indication of interest from the Navy or War Departments. I thought they would investigate an offer such as mine immediately."

I didn't know just what to say. This

little guy who thought he was a Martian had a peculiar way of setting me back on my heels. His conversation sounded like something that might have originated in a padded cell, but his obvious air of conviction and intelligence was baffling. It was unnerving to hear an apparently rational creature calmly discussing the situation on Mars.

I shook my head and ran a hand over my forehead.

"You say the secret weapon is in the closet?" I asked.

"Well, not exactly," the little man smiled. "The weapon is on Mars."

"I see," I said. "Well, that's a nice safe place for it."

"But I will show it to you," Ang-Ar said. "It will only take me a few seconds to have it sent here."

"Free Rural Delivery, I suppose," I said. This was getting worse all the time. The gentlemen with the strait jackets should know about this case.

Ang-Ar stood up and walked to the closet and opened the door.

"Perhaps you'd like to see this," he said. "You might find it rather interesting."

"Sure," I said. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

I stepped around beside him and received a definite surprise. There was a small gleaming machine in the closet supported on a metal table. The machine was only about a foot square. The front of it was glass covered and I was able to peer into a small empty compartment. A row of dials was built into the base of the machine and there were four intricate coils on top. I don't know why but the thing *looked* impressive. I could see at a glance that it wasn't something built on a tinkerer's cellar work bench. The shining metal frame work and the row of rheostats were the creation of a highly skilled machinist equipped with the

best of tools. That much was obvious.

I looked at my little friend with increased respect.

"This is an elementary device which we perfected many centuries ago," he explained. "With it we are able to break down the atomic structure of matter and then transfer the electronic units to any spot we desire for reassembly."

"In other words this gadget can send solid matter through space," I said. "It must come in handy at times."

"This is one of those times," Ang-Ar said, a touch of dryness in his voice. "The weapon which I intend to place at the disposal of your government is on Mars. Specifically it is in a machine corresponding to the one you see here. When I signal Mars my colleagues will de-atomize the weapon and flash it across space. We should have it in a very few minutes."

"How nice," I said weakly.

"It is convenient," Ang-Ar said placidly. He twisted one of the small black dials to the left. "That's all there is to it," he said. "We won't have long to wait."

For the men from the booby hatch, I thought, but I didn't say anything. To be truthful I was becoming more and more puzzled.

Ang-Ar made another adjustment with one of the rheostats and then pointed to the glass fronted compartment.

"Watch now," he murmured.

I bent over and peered into the empty compartment. But I suddenly realized it wasn't empty any more. In the exact center of the enclosure there was a misty line of blue bubbles forming. They hung suspended in the air without any apparent support and with each second they thickened and assumed more definite shape and solidity.

"What is it?" I demanded. I had my

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Menthol: 19 mg. "tar,"
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FTC Report Aug. '72.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

face shoved up to the glass like an inquisitive goldfish and I could see that the object materializing in the case was a slender tube, black in color and about the size of a fountain pen.

"That is the weapon," Ang-Ar explained. "Do not be disappointed by its innocuous appearance. I assure you it is quite effective."

"What does it do?" I asked. I was getting excited.

"I shall give you a demonstration," Ang-Ar said.

He snapped a switch on the side of the machine, opened the glass door of the small compartment and removed the slender black tube.

"You will notice," he said, holding the object up for my inspection, "that there is a switch on one end of the tube. When this is turned on a powerful invisible ray emanates from the barrel end of the weapon. The device is simple enough to be operated by a child but that does not alter its effectiveness."

"What kind of a ray is it?"

"A disintegrating ray, powerful enough to de-atomize any known element," Ang-Ar replied.

"Just like Buck Rogers," I murmured. I was returning to sanity again. For a minute I had been really impressed, but—a disintegrating ray!

Ang-Ar ignored my facetious comment and picked up a heavy bronze ash tray from his desk.

"This will do for a demonstration," he said. "You can see that this metal is solid and durable." He set it back on the desk and pointed the tube at it. "Now watch closely to what happens when it is exposed to the effect of the ray."

He flicked on the switch and nothing happened. There was no blue lights or crackling of energy and there was no apparent effect on the bronze ash tray.

And I felt more than ever like the city's supreme chump for wasting this much time listening to the babbling of an out-and-out crack-pot.

"Something the matter?" I inquired politely.

Ang-Ar was imperturbable. "No, it takes a few seconds for the ray to reach full strength."

"Oh, sure," I said, yawning slightly. "But I've got plenty of time. I—"

"There!" Ang-Ar said.

I swung my eyes back to the bronze ash tray and a sudden flash of excitement swept over me. The bronze tray was glowing a fiery, cherry red and, as I stared bug-eyed at the spectacle, it suddenly crumbled away into flaky ash. In a second nothing was left, even the white residue of ash dissolving and disappearing.

"You see," Ang-Ar said quite calmly, "that's all there is to it."

He flicked off the switch on the slender tube and dropped it into his pocket. He smiled at me. "Are you convinced now? Your scepticism has been quite apparent."

I took a deep slow breath. My eyes were still riveted unbelievably on the spot where the bronze ash tray had rested. I couldn't quite make myself believe that my eyes were telling the truth.

"It's very remarkable," I said cautiously. I ran my hand over the surface of the desk. It was uncharred and apparently in no way affected by the blast of energy that had disintegrated the ash tray.

"No," Ang-Ar said, "the desk has not been damaged in any way. The weapon has a high degree of control and its ray only acts on the object at which it is directly aimed."

I felt somewhat dazed. I couldn't quite analyze my own feelings. If this thing were on the level it was stu-

pendous, but if it were just a gag—

"What kind of a ray is created by that weapon?" I asked.

Ang-Ar smiled. "I don't mean to sound superior but I am quite sure you wouldn't be able to understand its principle. But I have blue-prints and complete information on it all typed out and ready to give to the War Department. They should be able to have it in production in several weeks. All the materials necessary for its manufacture exist in abundance on Earth."

I was stumped. I didn't know quite what to believe.

"As you are a newspaperman," Ang-Ar said, "perhaps you could publicize my intentions and arrange an interview with the War Department for me. I would appreciate it very much if you would do this."

"Sure," I said, "I'll write a story on it." But I didn't know yet what kind of a story I was going to write.

"Thank you very much," Ang-Ar said.

"Not at all."

I shook hands with him and left him standing in the center of the office a pleased little smile on his intelligent red face. Outside in the corridor I walked to the elevator, frowning thoughtfully. A man brushed against me and I noticed, abstractedly, that it was the dark, lean-faced fellow with the black slouch hat whom I'd noticed when I had arrived. But I was too pre-occupied with my own thoughts to wonder why he was loitering about.

I went back to the office and told the chief of the details of the interview. He shoved his green eyeshade back on his forehead and grinned.

"Sounds wonderful," he said.

I frowned. "I don't know. Maybe there's something to what the guy said. I tell you, chief, I'm not sure that this is just a gag."

The chief looked at me in pained surprise.

"Are you serious?" he demanded. "Do you mean to tell me you think this crackpot actually came from Mars?"

"No, of course not," I said irritably, "but what about his weapon? I saw that thing in action and it impressed me. Maybe we should report this to the War Department instead of doing a humorous feature on it."

"That would be fine," the chief snorted. "Can't you imagine the reception we'd get if we went to the War Department with a yarn like that? Now forget this nonsense and do a yarn on this bug for the next edition."

So I shrugged and locked myself in my cubicle, put a fresh sheet of paper into my punch press and went to work. I batted out the story in less than an hour and dropped it on the boss's desk.

He read it smiling.

"This is great," he chuckled. "This is funny as the devil."

I put on my hat. "If it isn't we're all going to feel like first class chumps."

"Are you still worrying about the fact that this might be on the level?" the chief laughed. "You been working too hard, son, or else the heat's getting you. Forget about this story and go out and get yourself a nice cold glass of beer. You can put it on your expense account."

"Thanks," I said drily. I walked out of the office and the chief's idea didn't seem like a bad one when that sun hit me. I found a comparatively cool dark tavern and stood at the bar sipping a brew and worrying about—of all things—my little red-faced friend who claimed he came from Mars.

My job was done. I'd gotten the interview, written the story and that was all there was to it. I was a reporter,

not a detective or psychiatrist, so what was I worrying about? I had another beer and continued to worry. All right, supposing he did have a powerful weapon? That wasn't any business of mine. Supposing the War Department was too busy to investigate every crackpot claim, was that my affair?

Definitely not, I decided, waving for another beer.

I don't know how long I stood there, sipping beer and muttering to myself, but finally I picked up my change and walked out into the street.

It was late in the afternoon and the streets were jammed with secretaries hurrying homeward. The sun was still shining hotly. I waved to a cab and climbed in. I gave the driver the address of the building where I had met the little man from Mars.

I hadn't the faintest idea why I was going back to see him. My tongue-in-cheek story on him would be on the streets by this time; maybe he'd seen it already. But some inner compulsion was goading me on.

I wanted to talk to that little man again and, for some reason, I felt that any delay might be—well—dangerous was the word that popped into my mind but that was ridiculous.

The driver braked the car to a stop, I paid him and got out. The lobby of the building was deserted and there were several scrubwomen scouring the marble floor with stiff, soapy brushes.

I pressed the elevator button and waited impatiently until a car appeared. For some unaccountable reason I was becoming more and more jittery.

When I stepped out of the elevator I strode down the quiet deserted hall toward the office I had visited earlier in the day. The thought had occurred to me that my little chum with the dis-integrator ray might have gone home.

And I wanted to talk to him as soon as possible.

There was no light visible behind the glazed door of his office but I knocked anyway. My hopes revived as I saw the shadow of a human figure moving inside the room. The shadow grew larger as it approached the door and then the knob turned and I was staring at a tall figure, with a lean frowning face, partially obscured by a black slouch hat.

"What do you want?" The man's mouth was a thin slit that seemed to open barely wide enough to let the terse words slip through. His deep shadowed eyes were watching me with hungry intensity.

I started to reply and then something halted the words. I was staring at the man in the doorway and I suddenly recognized him as the person I'd noticed loitering in the corridor earlier in the afternoon. What was he doing here in this office? That was my first suspicious thought.

Possibly he noticed my frowning stare because he moved closer to me and his eyes were hard and cold.

"Well?" he snapped. "What do you want?"

There was no point in stalling. "I want to see Mark Shean," I said. "Is he here?"

"No!" The door started to close.

"Just a minute," I said. My temper was beginning to boil. I didn't like being treated like a magazine salesman. "I had an appointment with him here tonight," I said, lying glibly. "If he's not here I'd like to know where I can reach him."

"So," the man in the doorway said softly, "you have an appointment with him, do you?"

I noticed then that he was studying me closely.

"You were here this afternoon,

weren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said drily. "Popular place, isn't it?"

That, for some reason, made him smile, but there was no humor in his wolfish grin. His lips merely flattened against strong white teeth.

"You recall seeing me here, don't you?" he said, rocking slowly back and forth on his heels.

"Yes," I said. "You were wearing a potted palm behind your ear and carrying a rose-colored fan. You were hard to miss."

"Won't you please come in?" he said. He opened the door and stepped aside.

I hesitated for an instant, then I stepped past him into the room. There was another man in the office, a heavily built, dull-looking young man with cropped blond hair and unwinking blue eyes.

Slouch Hat closed the door behind me and smiled at the other man.

"This gentleman has an appointment with our friend," he said. "He was here this afternoon and he was so intrigued that he came back. Isn't that interesting?"

The big young man stood up slowly and stared at me, his bovine features devoid of expression. He seemed to be measuring me with his cold eyes.

"Yes," he said in a thick voice, "that is very interesting."

"I knew you would think so," Slouch Hat murmured. He turned to me. "Now what was it you wanted to discuss with our—friend?"

I shrugged, stalling for time. There was something phony here but I couldn't figure out just what it was. "He wanted to tell me something," I said. "I haven't any idea what it was and I fail to see how it's any of your business."

"Now you mustn't adopt that attitude," Slouch Hat said, still grinning.

"You are sure you have no idea what our friend wished to discuss with you? It would be so pleasant if you could remember what it was."

"Yes, I have a pretty good idea," I said.

My eyes had seen something as Slouch Hat was talking that made an electric shiver of danger along my spine. I was stalling desperately now, groping for anything that would get me out of this office. The closet door was slightly ajar and I could see that the materialization set I had seen demonstrated that afternoon was gone. And I could see that it had been literally jerked out by the roots. Also the carpet of the office was scuffed and wrinkled and I noticed the large blond young man's collar was open and the button had been torn away.

Slouch Hat was still watching me carefully.

"What do you think our friend wanted to discuss with you?" he asked.

I frowned and looked dumb. "I think it was about the ad he's been running in the paper. You see I'm in the classified department of the *Chronicle*. I think he wanted the ad changed. My boss sent me over to see him."

"Ah," Slouch Hat said softly, "so you work for the Washington *Chronicle*?"

"Yes, in classified."

"That is interesting," Slouch Hat smiled. "But I'm afraid your trip has been of no avail. We are not expecting our friend back."

"Okay," I shrugged. "I did my best. I'd better be getting along, got a lot of calls to make."

"Yes, I think that is a good idea," Slouch Hat said.

I smiled at them and turned for the door. I guess I was just born without brains. I hadn't taken a step before something like a battering ram exploded against the base of my skull

and a blazing pinwheel of light danced in front of my eyes for an instant and then faded into blackness as I pitched to the floor. . . .

A cool, strong breeze in my face brought me around. When I was able to blink open my eyes I saw that I was sitting in the rear of a big smoothly purring car that was eating the ribbon of road that extended ahead of us. There was salty tinge to the breeze that whipped in from the windows and, in spite of the darkness that obscured the scenery, I could tell that we were heading toward the coast.

I looked to my left.

Slouch Hat was sitting beside me, a hand in his pocket.

I looked to my right.

The big blond ox was there, hand in pocket. He regarded me sullenly and I knew why when I saw the ugly bluish bruise on the knuckles of his exposed hand.

There was a throbbing ache at the base of my skull where the young ox had slugged me.

"Okay," I said, "what goes?"

"Shut up," Slouch Hat said. "You'll know soon enough."

There was an ominous ring in the man's voice. I shut up. About twenty minutes later the car swung off the highway and followed a crooked dirt road for several jolting miles and then, just when I was feeling like a milkshake, it slowed to a stop alongside a small dark hut.

Ahead, by the silver glow of the moon, I could see the shimmering beauty of the ocean. The driver got out and Slouch Hat followed suit. The blond ox shoved a gun into my side.

"Get out," he said softly. "And be careful."

I stumbled through the darkness toward the hut. There was a gun in my back and nothing else I could do. The

door was open and I stepped over the threshold with a clammy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The door slammed behind me and then, an instant later, a small light was flashed on, casting a pale, uncertain illumination about the little room.

The room was small and crudely furnished and there was only one door other than the one by which I had entered. Slouch Hat was standing in the center of the room regarding me with a humorless smile; the driver was at the window peering out toward the ocean; the blond ox was directly behind me and I knew that the muzzle of his gun was but inches from my spinal column.

"Kidnapping is a pretty serious business," I said to Slouch Hat. "Especially kidnapping reporters. How do you propose to wiggle out of that?"

Slouch Hat's grin was wolfish.

"Since you are being technical," he said, "the charge against us will not be kidnapping." He paused and his smile widened. "The charge will be murder!"

The blond ox behind me grabbed my wrists, jerked them together and looped a rope about them and pulled the knots tight. There wasn't much point in struggling.

The driver at the window said quietly, "There is the signal."

"Good," Slouch Hat nodded. "We must hurry."

He stepped over and opened the room's other door and said something in a low voice. There was a movement inside the connecting room and then a small figure appeared in the doorway. A small man with a red face and black hair and pleasant intelligent features.

I recognized him instantly as Ang-Ar. He looked at me briefly, without interest, then turned to the tall dark leader.

"Are we ready?" His small hands were concealed in his pockets, and he spoke softly, without expression.

Slouch Hat nodded. My blond keeper shoved me toward the door. Outside the darkness was relieved by a quarter moon. We followed a path-way leading to the beach. Slouch Hat was in the lead; Ang-Ar was behind him, followed by the stocky figure of the driver. The blond ox and I brought up the rear.

When we reached the beach Slouch Hat produced a flashlight and signalled rapidly. His light was answered by another far out on the dark swell of the water. And I could see an ominous black shadow about two hundred yards out. A long dark shadow that was like the drifting carcass of a mighty shark. A cold hand of fear closed around my heart. Suddenly everything was clear. These men were agents of the Axis, one of their subs was lying out on the surface of the water either to pick them up or to unload more spies and saboteurs. What part Ang-Ar was playing in this game I didn't know.

Slouch Hat turned to me. His smile was gone.

"If you had been able to control your inquisitive instincts," he said, "this unpleasantness might have been avoided."

Slowly he drew a gun from his pocket.

"Unfortunately you must remain behind," he said.

Ang-Ar stepped forward quietly. His glance was puzzled as it moved over the three Axis agents.

"But, gentlemen," he said softly, "you—"

"Please keep quiet," Slouch Hat said harshly. "What I said has nothing to do with what I am going to do. Remember that I have this." He whipped out a small slender tube from his coat pocket. I recognized it as the disin-

tegrating ray weapon.

"Of course you have it," Ang-Ar said, "I gave it to you." He shook his head in a puzzled fashion. "I do not understand this. If you men are agents of the United Nations—"

"What!" I yelled. I couldn't help it. I suddenly saw the whole picture. I wheeled to Ang-Ar, breaking away from the blond guard who held me. "Don't listen to these lying rats," I shouted. "They're—"

Slouch Hat stepped forward and clubbed me with the butt of his gun along the temple. A sick, nauseous pain flooded through me as I fell helplessly to the ground; but I didn't black out. I just lay there, gasping and miserable. Through a maze of pain I saw Slouch Hat swing his gun around to cover Ang-Ar.

"Don't make a move," he snapped. "I have what I want from you and I'd be happy to blast a hole through your stomach."

"You struck a helpless man," Ang-Ar said in a soft musing tone. "That is the evidence of the brute streak, I imagine. That is the mark by which one can tell them." He sounded like a man talking to himself, thinking a problem over out loud before arriving at a definite conclusion.

"Shut up!" Slouch Hat said tensely. His gun hand was trembling with the eagerness to fire.

"How stupid I've been," Ang-Ar murmured. "I am very dissatisfied with myself."

Slouch Hat backed slightly. "You talk too much," he murmured to Ang-Ar.

I saw the gleam in his eye. "—careful," I croaked. "He's going to shoot."

"Yes," said Ang-Ar reflectively, "I imagine he is."

With a slight smile he moved one

hand slightly and instantly a blazing aura of brilliant radiation sprang about him, like a protective shield. Slouch Hat fired three times in rapid succession. Ang-Ar continued to smile. The bullets melted with an audible hiss as they struck the fiery armor of leaping light surrounding him.

The three Axis agents staggered back, but they were unable to avoid the three shafts of lance-like light that suddenly speared forth from the cone of energy and drove into their foreheads.

They fell, sprawling on the sand, without a sound. And the blazing light that surrounded Ang-Ar faded away. I felt his hands working on my bonds and then I was free and staggering dizzily to my feet.

"I have been unpleasantly duped," he said, with a rather humble smile. "I came here under the impression that I was to meet the heads of your war department. Instead these men—"

A rattle suddenly sounded over the water and spray began kicking up along the shoreline.

"The sub," I snapped. "They're opening up on us. Get down!"

"How foolish of them," Ang-Ar murmured.

The blazing cone of energy sprang about him again. He raised one arm and a brilliant, arcing beam of light flashed out over the water. There was a mighty roar in my ears and then hissing, sputtering turbulence, as if all the boilers in the world were suddenly exploding.

The light blinded me and the noise pounded in my ears until I could hear nothing. When the cataclysmic roar

subsided the blazing radiance disappeared and, a hundred yards out, I could see a great frothing series of bubbles and oil breaking the surface. The shark-like shadow of the sub was gone.

Ang-Ar stepped to the sprawled body of the man who had worn the slouch hat and took a small slender object from his limp fingers. It was the small disintegrator ray. He slipped it into his pocket.

"I shall leave you now," he said. "My coming here was a mistake. I might do more harm than good by trying to help your brave people. The difference between the development of our civilizations is too great to be spanned; but," he smiled fleetingly, "should you really need us we will be ready and waiting." The cone of electrical energy blazed again and when its glow subsided I was alone on the beach with the bodies of three Axis agents.

I turned and headed back up the path to where we had left the car. . . .

Of course I got the credit for single-handedly capturing three saboteurs who attempted to land on our coast. I felt guilty as hell accepting the plaudits of everyone from the President on down, but what could I do? If I told the truth I'd wind up in a strait jacket. So . . .

Now, on still nights, when I'm working a late beat I look up and find the red eye of Mars winking in the blackness of the bowl of night—and I feel a pleasant warm glow of reassurance.

We won't need their help to win this war. But it's comforting to know if we should, Ang-Ar and others like him are ready and willing and waiting.

Coming In March AMAZING

JACK VANCE'S greatest new novel, **TRULLION-ALASTOR**: 2262, plus other great stories and features.

(continued from page 59)

Everywhere Reid looked, the Arkites were absorbing themselves in some small task, gladly, willingly. Life for them had suddenly taken on purpose and meaning.

Reid felt a light touch on his arm; he turned to see Susan looking up at him, her grey eyes shining moistly.

"John—they're happy!" she whispered incredulously.

"A building people are always a happy people, Susan. All the Arkites ever needed was a goal toward which to direct their efforts—something more than merely the dream of one man, something which they could visualize for themselves. They have that, now."

"And I've found something, too, John."

The shining, grey eyes still looked up at him. Reid glanced away, troubled to find that this girl could still make his heart ache in spite of the happiness that had finally come to him.

"I'm glad," he said huskily. "This is a new beginning for you, too, I suppose. Steve Norlin will be back, of course, and then you'll have your own home and—"

"You *are* blind, aren't you, John? And you're wrong about Steve. No; he won't be back. He was really in love with himself, you see. Loss of the city meant an end to his hopes of comfort and leisure, and there just wasn't anything else left for him." Susan shook her auburn head. "He won't be back."

Reid had a sense of foreboding as

he looked into her eyes, wide and dark with the age-old intuition of woman. He was to remember this feeling forcefully several weeks later when Norlin's body was discovered in the forest, its head blown off by the blast-gun. But at the present it was crowded aside by a sudden, heart-quickenning thrill.

"You—you don't care?" he cried.

Her grey eyes smiled again. "No, John. I stopped caring that day I asked you if you wanted me. Oh, you should have seen your face! That was what I learned—real love. You wanted me, but the race came first. And I knew you were right, John, though I did want to help the Arkites. I realized, then, that what Steve was doing was wrong; I knew that if I had offered myself to him in order to prevent him from going to the city, that he'd have refused me. It was his own well-being that concerned him most; he had no real thought for the Arkites."

Susan was silent a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was very soft.

"Well, I'm here if you still want me."

"Still want you? Why—" Reid choked inarticulately; the words he wanted to say were so full with affirmation that they stuck in his throat. Music throbbed in his veins. And then, somehow, she was in his arms and his cheek was pressed to her hair, and there was no longer need to say anything.

THE END

On Sale Now in JANUARY AMAZING

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WARLORD of PEACE

by LEROY YERXA

Daggerman had a plan to end war that was foolproof—just install a pushbutton atom bomb system under all cities, and . . .

AS A RULE, I'm not inclined to be a sorehead. In fact my position on United Viso-Features demands that I toss off tones of sweetness and light in all direction around the globe. Sometimes, though, I wish that people would get the cotton out of their ears, open their eyes and see what's going on about them in this world.

For example, last week we buried another "time-capsule." The International Guidance Council got the brilliant idea. Everyone went nuts over the thought of burying another collection of drivel in a big, metallic tube and sticking it into the ground for our ancestors to find and marvel over. It hasn't been long since the last "time-capsule" was found, and in it, a cross-section of drivel like that which can be found under several layers in any large city dump.

But we are burying another time-capsule amid great fan-fare. There are several thousand micro-film records of our entire civilization, which are on record throughout the world, and for that matter, the planetary system. It isn't enough. We had to bury a "time-capsule", and people stood around and mourned as though we were putting a slice of our very life into the niches in the rock.

People—sentimental, believing children.

I sat in the large telo-screen booth over at United-Viso last night. I was reading a creation delivered by Senator Ripping. The Senator is a "friend of the peepul."

"This nation," Ripping's speech read, and I was delivering it second-hand with a straight face, "has come far on the road to peace. Never have we, as a people, been on more friendly terms with our brothers. My friends, unaccustomed as I am to delivering . . ."

There was a lot more of the stuff. It near strangled me. I hoped that my evening news fans couldn't see the tongue in my cheek. I would have liked to stick it out.

I knew that Chuck Lambert, my boss and owner of United-Viso, was seated in his booth upstairs, keeping all his little "viso-etchings" running in straight lines, and grinning at my misery.

"Foremost among all men, and loved by us all," Ripping's speech labored on, "is Professor Phillip Daggerman, Chief Scientist for the International Guidance Council. His burial today was a blow from which we will never quite recover. He is a hero who will never . . ."

I choked on that one. Too much of the junk in one dose. I hid my face behind a water glass and gulped deeply. I felt a little better and managed to



struggle through to the ending. I said:

"This is Bob Farnum of United-Viso-Features, turning the broadcast over to Ben Wallace who waits for you at . . ."

CHUCK LAMBERT switched the broadcast over to Wallace, who was waiting to cover the opera season down in the dim canyons of New York. I got up and wandered out of the booth and leaned against the water cooler. Lambert came down from the control-room. He grinned at me, and it cooled me off a little. Chuck Lambert isn't a big-shot. He's just a guy with a million bucks, a powerful transmitting station of his own, and a good nature. He stands five-foot-seven and can play wicked poker. I couldn't stay mad at him for long, at any given time. He was my brother-in-law, and he was my boss.

"That's awful tripe to swallow, isn't it Bob?"

"It is," I said bitterly. "People who live in glass houses—shouldn't. It seems to me that every politician around the globe was *born* in a glass house and has been heaving stones ever since."

Lambert put his hand on my shoulder. He wasn't soft about it. He knows how I feel.

"Mustn't go sour on the dear, dear 'peepul'," he cautioned me. "After all, it's a living."

"And a good one," I admitted. "I haven't any kicks coming. Wasn't I voted the dream-man of the House-Wife's Radio Club?"

That's a gag I've been fighting for three years, but my boyish appearance and curly black hair just arouses the mother instinct, and I can't keep them from bowling like she-wolves.

"Look," Chuck suggested as calmly as possible, "you're getting plenty sour.

I'm coming up for dinner. My sister should welcome me, even if you don't."

He made me feel silly, and like a small boy who's been griping about nothing.

"Sorry, Chuck," I said. "I get to thinking about Daggerman, and the stuff he pulled, and it burns me up. I keep remembering how it all started three years ago, in that same broadcasting booth I read Ripping's speech in tonight."

Three years ago? It had been a century, so far as my sour temper and its birth was concerned.

IT WAS in that same booth, during my usual morning broadcast. I had just opened the morning session of news and views.

"Bob Farnum, ladies, bringing the news into your life and I hope, giving you a few moments rest away from your kitchen . . ."

Chuck Lambert passed a note through the door at my elbow, his arm out of range of the telo-screen. I looked down at it, and I'm afraid the pleasant looked changed to bewilderment.

"Just a moment," I said over the screen, and picked up the note. "Ladies, a report of great interest has just been passed to me."

I gave them the winsome, toothy smile that I hate and they fall for, and started to read:

"The International Guidance Council has just announced the acceptance of a new protective system to be used throughout the world as a preventative against war. The services of Scientist Phillip Daggerman have been purchased. Daggerman has perfected a 'protecto-screen device' that will for all time, outlaw war."

I could picture all my housewife fans crawling away from the kitchen and coming to attention before the telo-

screen, their dish-water hands and scrub-women's knees forgotten. Women love to hear that a new way has been found to prevent war.

There wasn't any more to that dispatch, but knowing that politics were once more on the loose, I was worried. Two days later I had managed to digest a fair percentage of the hokum that was being peddled to the "common peepul." I was thunderstruck to find out that they were swallowing Daggerman's scheme hook, line and sinker.

Chuck Lambert, his sister Mary, and I, sat up many a sleepless night discussing what had happened. I imagine that a number of scientific minds had absorbed what was going on, but they had no opportunity to fight Daggerman. He had sold himself cleverly, and for keeps.

"Daggerman is smart," Chuck said one night, when we were eating sausage and pancakes at my apartment, and Mary was dashing around with a pretty, flushed face and a neatly tied apron. "Maybe he's got the right idea."

Mary, a slim brunette with all the needed special equipment and neat chassis, looked puzzled. She could look puzzled in a bright, attentive way. Something about the angle of her head, perched on one side when she asked a question.

"Just what is Daggerman's plan?"

"He's an old timer in politics," I told her. "He has the right background. Twenty years in the Government Atomic Research Lab., fifteen years at the Political College at New York. The way I get it, is this. Daggerman has been tossing theories at the International Guidance Council for years. Briefly, he says that no matter what treaties exist, one nation cannot trust another. Therefore, he will form a cooperation, accept a huge bounty from the Council and install complete atomic

war machines in every nation on earth."

I TOOK a deep breath, and Chuck applauded lightly.

"Nice speech, Mr. Farnum," he said. "I'll take another helping of sausage, Mary."

I smiled at Mary.

"Chuck's jealous," I said. "Secretly, he's impressed by my knowledge."

"As though I didn't know that Daggerman says at present atomic bombs are being turned out underground. During the last war, back in 1950, we didn't have the courage to go 'all-out' with atomic offense. We fooled around with marble-size explosives and left the king-size stuff alone."

"Right," I agreed. "Now Daggerman says that when one nation gets the lead, they'll crack down first and give everything they have, including the *atom-dust* blanket which won't leave much to pick up."

Chuck looked grim.

"That's the way with the human animal," he said. "It will tear down its house and kill its family brutally, then start to rebuild all over again."

"And Daggerman is going to see it done right this time. He is going to place deeply buried control bunkers in every capitol city on the planet. There will be push-button controls in each bunker, with a military man on duty at all times. Also he will place carefully aimed cannons in and about each capitol, with enough large atomic projectiles to blow every city off the map at a moment's notice."

Chuck swore softly, but I went on without paying any attention.

"Daggerman's theory is this. If we *all* have the same amount of war machinery, and we are *all* on the same basis so far as power to fight is concerned, then no one will dare start a war. We will be forever checkmated or

stalled. A damned ticklish idea, but they've fallen for it."

Chuck went for a bottle of fire-water and we tried some of it. The stuff was too potent. Chuck made a return trip to the kitchen for some chaser, and I tried out Mary's new lipstick. It tasted wonderful.

"Then Daggerman is going to put all the cards on the table," Chuck said when he came back.

I nodded.

"He's getting several billion dollars for the idea, and the installations. Daggerman can't lose."

Mary sighed.

"I'm beginning to understand," she admitted. "A fortune for Daggerman. Sooner or later, someone will lose their temper and the buttons will be pressed. Then it's just a matter of time before we visit our honorable ancestors."

Chuck found a comfortable spot on the divan and tasted his drink.

"The thing that puzzles me," he said slowly, "is that Daggerman either expects his plan to work, or he thinks he can escape the general hell that's bound to result."

"You forget," I reminded him dryly, "that human nature has changed, if we are to believe Daggerman. Once we *all* have a chance to blow our neighbors sky-high, we'll each be frightened to start the idea. That's what Daggerman is planning on."

ON THE way down to the studio, I brooded a lot over our discussion. For several weeks I watched each news-dispatch carefully, trying to read something behind the lines. There wasn't anything to read. It all seemed on the up and up. I remembered, so many times in history, when one leader had been clever enough to convince his followers that he was a god. This was exactly what had happened.

One thing troubled me in Daggerman's plan. He would gain in dollars and cents, yet what good would his money do when hell broke loose on earth? He would be destroyed with the others, *or would he?*

I sat upright in the rear of the cab and stared at the driver's head. He saw me through the rear-view mirror and grinned with his thick lips.

"You ain't Bob Farnum of United-Viso, are you?" I nodded.

"My wife," he said. "She's nuts about you."

I told him thanks, and would he use the gasoline a little more freely: I was in a hurry.

When he let me out at the studio, I tossed him a buck and went to the office. I did a lot of thinking about Daggerman, and came to some pretty startling conclusions.

The more I worried about the thing, the more Daggerman seemed to be arguing against the logic that must be well mixed into his education. If you gave equal power to every nation, in the form of a lot of explosives it could dump into a neighbor's lap, sooner or later someone would lose his temper and do the dumping. Once it was started, there wasn't any possible answer but death for all.

I wondered if I could sell Chuck Lambert on the idea of doing a personal interview with Daggerman, over the facilities of United Viso-Features. It took a lot of convincing, but I finally sold Chuck on it.

There was a catch to it. Phillip Daggerman was a retiring cuss. He had built a small ranch house out in Arizona, hidden back in the Superstition Mountain Range. We had to ship a lot of stuff to Phoenix, and have it taken back into the hills by cat-track, that little donkey of the caterpillar-treads. I arranged a pass with the International

Guidance Council, got an okay from Daggerman, and on April sixteenth, the interview took place.

It cost Chuck Lambert a cool million to cover expenses, the planet had a chance to look upon the small, narrow faced genius who had saved it from destruction, and the whole thing gave me a chance to look the angles over from the dry, hell-hot scenery of the Superstition Range.

Daggerman's home was a modest diggings, and it didn't show the effects of a fortune at all. It didn't click. It didn't click at all.

BACK at the home office, I gave a dozen accounts of bird's-eye views of the *Great Man Himself*. I told what he ate for breakfast, how he lounged about in pajamas and viewed the earth as a good, safe place to be.

Meanwhile, I checked back with every damned wholesale house in and around Phoenix. There were stories of immense amounts of furniture, office equipment, power-plants, pipes, wiring, all consigned to Daggerman in the Superstitions. No one but myself, it seemed, wondered where he had hidden all this stuff in a ten room cottage without being a magician.

An unofficial check-up with "Bull" Bronson, a banking pal of mine, indicated that Daggerman had withdrawn fifteen million dollars from the International Bank at Berne, Switzerland, and had purchased all rights on the power trust controlling Boulder Dam.

Like the young man in ancient history who looked in that direction, I "went west." Two weeks work located the new set-up functioning under the Boulder Dam Trust. Daggerman had tried something new. Old timers said it wouldn't pay him a dime. Daggerman was sinking his money into an electro-cable, an offshoot of the main Boulder

line, to be run across the desert and into Mexico. This cheap electro-power, Daggerman said, would give him the opportunity of selling cheap power south of the border, and actually making cash on the deal.

Old timers said there was plenty of power down there, and more wasn't needed.

The oddest part of it all, to me, was that the new cable detoured several hundred miles east of the direct route and passed directly across Phillip Daggerman's property.

IN JUNE, I went prospecting. It took me two weeks of wandering before I found a place along the new cable that wasn't patrolled by guards. I worked with cutting tools and used the repair materials later, to put the thing back in shape. There wasn't a wire in that entire cable that was strong enough to carry electro-units. One shot of juice would have burned them in half.

There were fourteen small wires in the cable, of the same size and type used on the new atomic setup. I'm not smart, but I put two and two together, and the answer wasn't very pleasant.

* * *

Backed by Lambert, and sinking deeper into my boots, I sat before President Charloff of the International Guidance Council, explaining my side of the story. We met in the secrecy of the Grand Council Chamber, a holy political spot where you feel like taking off your shoes before entering. I didn't. I told them everything I had found out through five months of hard work and worry. I demanded, as an American citizen, that they start an investigation.

The Chief Judge stared at me gravely when I had finished. His two companions looked a little pale. At first they shouted and told me I was crazy, and they would not insult Daggerman by

asking him foolish questions.

"Suppose we are able to start such an investigation," the Chief Judge said at length. "If we are wrong. . . ?"

"It's still a free country, and a free International World. Daggerman can't protest. If he's innocent, why should he worry?"

Chuck really swung the tide, though. I'll give him credit.

"Suppose you refuse to start the investigation?" he said with a file-edge on his voice. "We at United Viso-Features will blow the top off the whole dirty business. In five hours, you'll have more committees parked on your steps than you can get rid of in ten years."

The judges protested in unison.

"Daggerman is smart, gentlemen," Chuck said calmly. "Once hell breaks loose, he'll retire underground and watch the fireworks. He's going to sit tight until we kill ourselves off. Then he'll look out, smile and take over the nicest real-estate deal that any man ever claimed. With the cash he now has, he can establish credit anywhere in the planetary system, bring laborers here and build up an earth, all his own."

"But the atomic upheaval would destroy him."

Chuck shook his head.

"Daggerman sold you a bill-of-goods, gentlemen," he said gravely. "Sure, the old books say that such an atomic explosion would start a chain reaction that might destroy every living thing on earth. That's all right, as far as it goes. I'll make a bet that Daggerman hasn't overlooked a trick. It's a matter of power screens to break up that chain reaction. With the money he has spent, and the equipment he has gathered, don't think that he hasn't fortified himself well."

credit. They decided to take a chance. As I was able to pick up the story from semi-secret sources, it went roughly like this: One night, International Guards, who watched over Daggerman, forgot to be good watch-dogs. Secret Service men got through the lines and turned Daggerman's ranch upside down, quietly. They found piles of earth, covered with fruit orchards and such to hide them from the air. The dirt was stacked up high enough to indicate huge chambers beneath the earth. A lot of stuff showed up that didn't look good for a genius to own. The cable, traced through my previous work, was spliced at the ranch and went underground at that point.

The International Council called Daggerman to New York. Before he was called, the cable was cut apart in the desert and a detachment of troops was put at that spot to see that it did not grow together again.

Before Daggerman, and much to his amazement, Secret Service men told more about his business than he knew himself. For Daggerman, that was quite a blow.

I remember the day Daggerman died. They gave him a choice. He could die in public, or do away with himself. They preferred it that way, because it might upset the people to learn that Daggerman wasn't a hero after all. He went back to his ranch, under heavy guard. He retired to his secret chamber, after warning the guards to get away from that bit of real-estate, and then he pulled the levers.

He preferred it that way, rather than face the "electro-squad."

The explosion was seen a hundred miles away, and it knocked guards flat on their backs, at fifty.

THEY weren't convinced. I knew they weren't. But, give them

I READ a touching story over the "tele-screen," concerning the death

of our hero. The words they had made up about him gagged me.

Two weeks later they placed a statue of Daggerman in the Central Square before the International Guidance Council chambers. The tablet in bronze read like this:

"To a hero who lived and died in the service of his people."

* * *

For some reason, not made entirely clear to the followers of our Hero, Daggerman, the International Guidance Council decided a short time later to scrap the check-mate system of atomic bomb control. Someone might make the mistake of pushing a button release during a moment of anger. Daggerman would have done it if they had given him time. He had the button system almost ready, and he would have made mince-meat of us all, leaving only himself hidden under that screen-protected bunker in Arizona.

* * *

Life is a lot more simple now. The various nations go about their business again, secretly arming themselves and pretending to hope that nothing will come of it.

All in all, it isn't a bad idea. At least there is comfort in pretending that we love each other. None of that system Daggerman wanted, where we'd all sit and wait for the first—and last blow. This way, there is an element of surprise. With Daggerman, it was checkers, and he had all the Kings.

No, none of that "you press your button, and I'll press mine."

But you can understand why I hate so much mock sentiment. I hate this idea of burying another "time-capsule." Nine chances out of ten we'll never live

to dig it up again, anyhow. If someone does, they'll already have a complete history of us on micro-film, and the junk in the capsule will be—just junk.

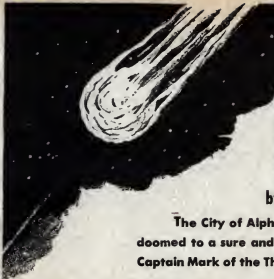
WELL, as jobs go, mine isn't a bad one. I sit here before the visoscreen, handing out lightness and warmth to those poor women who believe everything I'm forced to tell them. It makes them happier that way. A week after Daggerman died, I married Mary. Chuck gave us a cottage for a wedding gift, and raised my wages fifty a month. It isn't so much, but of course I don't have the responsibilities that Phillip Daggerman had.

With any luck at all, I can get along without having to take the hard way out, like Daggerman did. I can live a pretty full life with Mary, at least until another Phillip Daggerman comes along. There is a lot more war talk right now. Mothers who listen to my broadcast are frightened and sending in letters. There's howling because they say, as their representative on the air waves, I should do something about keeping their sons at home.

Good Lord, I've heard that before somewhere. Well, if I get blown up, I guess I won't be alone. When I think of the International Guidance Council, batting its head against the wall, and Senator Ripping still giving his impassioned speeches for the greater good of "his peepul," I remember another guy who did a good job of pulling wool over our eyes, until his world blew up in his own face.

Yes, Daggerman was a smart guy. Too smart. People who live in glass houses. . . .





THE THIRD BOLT

by FRANCES M. DEEGAN

**The City of Alpha of the Planet 23, was
doomed to a sure and certain destruction, but
Captain Mark of the Third Moon, knew about . . .**

THE great sun woke the City of Alpha one fine morning in the year 5010, and kissed it gently to a rosy blush. The splendid white towers and beautifully streamlined buildings crimsoned briefly, and then surrendered to the warm bright embrace of the greatest star in the universe.

Alpha, city of light, capital of Planet 23, was a monument



JULIAN
KREPA

to Man's power and greatness. It was called the queen of cities, and in all the vast solar system there had never been another like it.

The sun washed the last shadows of night from the glistening streets and struck glancing beams from the great central dome of the giant observatory. Far below the surveyors of space were unaware of their own sun as they recorded and tabulated cosmic movement and conditions, even to the outermost reaches of the universe.

The main observation section resembled a vast hollow sphere with the suns, their planets and satellites projected accurately on the inner surface. The surveyors worked at a huge circular control mechanism in the center, their movements as orderly and sure as the rhythm of the universe they observed. It was rare indeed that an unexpected phenomenon interrupted the systematic process of surveillance, but now it happened.

One pair of trained hands broke their rhythm over the multiple keyboard and depressed a red key. Instantly the complex mechanism did its work, and in various parts of the great star-shaped building activity quickened.

A short time later departmental chiefs met in special session to consider the phenomenon. The young surveyor who had been privileged to record the surprising occurrence was interviewed exhaustively, and commended for his alertness. The recorded data bore out his statements. A tiny planet in a far distant solar system had released a bolt of cosmic energy, contrary to all the known laws of Cosmos.

Thereafter a close watch was kept on that speck in space which had unaccountably loosed a sunbolt. The watchers were rewarded very shortly by two more bolts, and it was decreed by the executive board of the observatory that

the distant solar system and its small, precocious planet were to be kept under constant observation.

Meantime the chiefs of the giant observatory were busy making careful calculations and eventually a report was drawn up and presented to the High Council of Planet 23. The report aroused much interest and speculation, but no immediate fears, since the ominous prediction contained in it was not due to happen for nearly one thousand years.

"It would not be practical at this time," declared the Chief High Councillor, "to appropriate large sums for equipment designed to protect our planet from a danger a thousand years away. Future improvements would certainly render our present efforts obsolete. However, it would be interesting to know a little more about the behavior of these three bolts. I understand that their source is cosmic energy, but what is their nature?"

"A sunbolt," explained an aged astronomer, "is gaseous—a bolt shot from a burning sun. It is caused either by internal pressure, or by powerful exterior forces, such as the passage of a second sun which pulls matter away from the first. The bolt soon cools to liquid, and eventually into a cluster of small particles. These particles form the core of the bolt and they draw other particles, or planetesimals, so that the thing keeps growing as it travels. Thus planets are formed and held on their course by the attraction of one of the suns. Much of the matter wanders off into space, some falls back into the sun from which it came, while still other parts become planetoids."

"So this insignificant little planet in an inferior solar system suddenly imagines itself to be a sun," said the Chief High Councillor humorously. "And what happens to its offshoots?"

"THE first two bolts released by the tiny planet were drawn into its own small sun," said the astronomer patiently. "But the third bolt was discharged directly into the light stream from our great sun, where it will pick up particles impregnated with the magnetic force of our sun's rays, and thus be held on its course toward our sun, and toward a cataclysmic meeting with Planet 23. Since there have been no more bolts, it seems logical to assume that the third bolt has accomplished the purpose of whatever force or intelligence is quite logically behind their discharge."

"Even if there were intelligent beings on that distant planet," said the Chief High Councillor loftily, "and they were capable of releasing bolts of cosmic energy, I can see no point to it. Why aim at us? What can they possibly hope to accomplish a thousand years hence when and if their third bolt reaches Planet 23?"

"That we cannot tell you, sir," replied the aged astronomer. "They may be creatures with long range plans. They may even have a life span of a thousand years or more, as compared to our own average of one hundred years. We are convinced, however, that no tiny, cool planet such as that one is, could release sunbolts by itself. Nor has such a phenomenon ever been observed before, either from that distant solar system or from any of the other planets in the universe. Therefore we can only conclude that beings with an intelligence approaching our own inhabit that planet, and having solved the secret of cosmic energy, have made violent use of it."

"A very stupid way to use it," declared the Chief High Councillor comfortably. "It seems more likely that these occurrences were accidental. The

assumption that intelligent beings directed the bolts is a little far-fetched. On none of the many planets belonging to our own great sun have we found intelligence even remotely approaching ours on Planet 23. On the contrary, the state of the inhabitants was found to be pitifully primitive wherever thinking men exist. And on the majority of our planets we found only savage plant and animal life."

"That is because conditions on the other planets of our solar system are very different," said the astronomer. "Whereas, according to our latest theories, planetary conditions on that mysterious little world of a distant solar system are very similar to our own. Although it is only about one-fifth the size of Planet 23, it has an axial rotation of 23 to 24 hours and a sidereal revolution of approximately 365 days—"

"Yes, yes. I have no doubt," said the Chief High Councillor. "However, we still have quite a little time in which to decide what to do about the approaching bolt, and I see the steward is waiting to announce that the banquet is laid. Let us adjourn to the dining hall and see what our good chefs have devised for us this time."

THE formal session of the august governors of Planet 23, and also of the 34 other planets in the solar system, was adjourned properly but hastily. The High Councillors and their guests, the visiting scientists, rose in a body and made for the magnificent pink marble hall where a sumptuous feast was spread. It was the custom at that time to end each council meeting with a banquet which lasted for hours and sent more than one councillor staggering homeward in a merry mood. It was even whispered privately that many council meetings were called for the sole purpose of providing an official ex-

cuse for another banquet.

On the following day the aged astronomer, whose name was Mark, gave instructions for the filing of the report on the sunbolts.

His chief clerk eyed him sympathetically, and remarked, "They were not impressed with the report, sir?"

"They were amused—briefly," said Mark. "There is nothing more we can do about it, except to hope that some future generation will read the report and heed the warning in time. That is why I want three extra copies filed. One under Future Cosmic Disturbances. The second under Periodical phenomena. And the third on Third Moon in the time repository. Then perhaps, even though this civilization does not last, some one capable of understanding the report will find it and act to avert the catastrophe."

"But what could possibly happen to a civilization as powerful and as far advanced as ours, sir?" inquired the clerk politely. "We on Planet 23 are the greatest race ever known. We rule the solar system and our empire is greater than anything ever before conceived. Surely, such things will last forever."

Mark sighed heavily. Like many another astronomer, accustomed to viewing infinity, he was also a philosopher, and he said, "Neither a man nor an empire should be judged by the splendor of their greatness, but rather by their humility. It is how they carry that greatness, and how much they contribute to the future that counts. Because it is the future and not the present which takes the true measure of greatness."

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk, not believing a word of it. In his opinion the old man was merely voicing his irritation because the report had not caused any excitement. Humility indeed! Long

before the thousand years had passed Planet 23 would have attained such greatness their race would rule all the known universe, with power to stop the planets in their course—let alone a mere sunbolt!

This opinion was shared by everybody, except a few pessimists, and for a time the Third Bolt which was aimed at Planet 23 was treated as a joke; but it was soon forgotten in the press of more immediate concerns. . . .

CAPTAIN MARK, Commander of the Guard for the Penal Colony on Third Moon, was thinking of one of the ancient folk songs as he drove over wild wastes. Technically he was on an inspection tour. Actually, since there was nothing to inspect, he was just out for the ride. The silly jingle of the Bolt Song kept running through his mind. Perhaps because his mind had nothing more interesting with which to occupy itself in the uneventful year of 5976.

Life at its best was a dull business, even for a daring young commander in the King's service, who had braved the perils of space and defied the ancient superstitions to take up his command on Third Moon. The companionship he found there left much to be desired. The Governor was a vice-ridden bully, and his staff followed his example. Captain Mark was still young enough to look for glamor and romantic adventure, such as the heroes of ancient times encountered; but he was beginning to be somewhat disillusioned about the whole business. The historians were very probably liars, and their tales as baseless as the superstitious legends and songs which had come down from ancient times.

Many centuries ago (according to the historians) when the Empire of 23 was rich and powerful, speedy space ships traveled to all parts of the solar

system with greater ease than men could now achieve in travel from one continent to another. Captain Mark found this very difficult to believe, because the trip from Planet 23 to Third Moon had been a nightmare of uneasy panic and discomfort which lasted nearly forty days. It was necessary to carry 15,000 gallons of fuel oil for the unwieldy rocket ship, and the cargo of prisoners was jammed into all the remaining space. They groaned and cried all the way. Many died from fright and suffocation and were shot through the Glory Hole into the void.

The vast difference between space travel of ancient times and that of the present was explained by the historians with a very fishy tale indeed. It was supposed to be due to the disappearance of a mysterious element known as U-96, which had once been plentiful on Planet 23. When the domestic supply began to peter out, prospectors located rich deposits on remote Planet 14. But before a large reserve could be transported to 23, the civil wars broke out and raged from one section of the planet to another for nearly one hundred years. In the tragic confusion and hardship that followed, the formula for U-96 was lost, and with it the magic force which had made space travel so easy and profitable.

So said the glib historians. They also said that traffic was free and unhampered to every part of the solar system with one exception. Travel to Third Moon was forbidden. Obviously then Third Moon was a dangerous place. Certainly it was barren and unhealthy, not at all like the smaller and nearer First and Second Moons. But the old superstitious legends had a more definite explanation about the forbidden moon. They told of the terrible Third Bolt which was somehow to be unleashed from Third Moon for

the specific purpose of wiping the wick off the face of Planet 23. What would happen to the righteous was not clearly indicated, but all the evil and wicked men would certainly be destroyed.

CAPTAIN MARK grinned wryly at the thought that if ever the Third Bolt was going to do its stuff, it couldn't choose a better time than right now. As his ancient gyro-car brushed the tops of stunted trees and swerved to avoid a tall white splinter of stone still standing above the ruins of long forgotten buildings, he sang lustily:

*The Sky King has three bolts to throw,
The first one lights the sun,
And sets the heavens all aglow
To show the day's begun.
The second bolt puts out the light
And makes it dark again,
And everywhere the quiet night
Brings sleep to tired men.
The third bolt on Third Moon is hid
Within a silver chest,
Until Dame Justice lifts the lid
To scourge from East to West.*

*Oh, night and day we work and play
And sleep and wake again,
For night and day shall follow day
Till ten times ten times ten,
And then beware! The third bolt's ray
Shall wipe out wicked men.*

"And then beware!" roared Captain Mark at the wilderness of crumbled stone below. "The Third Bolt's ray—"

He broke off as he spied a monkey-like figure scrambling out of sight in the ruins. It could have been one of the wild, sad-eyed monkeys that managed to exist on the barren moon. On the other hand, it had looked a little larger than a monkey. He maneuvered the balky old gyro over an open ex-

panse paved with black and white squares. Here the debris of fallen columns was more widely scattered and he was able to make a jerky landing. He examined his assortment of sharp metal weapons and selected the ten foot spear, using it to vault agilely out of the car.

The sound of his boots on the pavement was loud and sharp. Everything else about the ruins was deathly still and covered with the dust of finely sifted sand. Captain Mark made directly for the jagged hole where he had seen the monkey figure disappear. As he approached it he saw the prints of agitated feet, and they had not been made by a monkey. They were easily recognizable as the marks left by the heavy shoes worn by the prisoners.

"Come out of there!" bellowed the captain angrily, starting up weird echoes.

"The Commander!" gasped a small frightened voice.

"Come out, I say! Or I'll bring you out one at a time on the end of my spear!"

A WOEBEGONE little creature sidled out, wearing the tight fitting brown suit assigned to all prisoners. Her short dark hair was badly mussed, her face grimy and streaked with tears, and her dark eyes full of misery. Indeed, she looked remarkably like one of the thin, sad-faced monkeys.

"There's only me, sir," she said weakly, and held up small dirty hands as if to ward off the murderously sharp spear head.

"What are you doing five hundred miles outside the Colony?"

"I was looking for something to eat."

"That's a lie. Every prisoner in the Colony is fed standard rations, in order to maintain the efficiency of their work. You wouldn't need to travel five hundred miles to find food, even if there

were any food on this forsaken moon."

"I mean just now, sir," she stammered. "I came out to look for something to eat—just now."

"Came out of where?"

One grimy fist pressed her mouth and her eyes filled with tears.

"Stop that!" said Captain Mark harshly. "And answer my questions! You know the penalty for runaways. You knew it before you escaped from the Colony. And no amount of hhubbering can save you from it now. If you've had to go hungry, it serves you right. You prisoners have been warned time and again that you'll find nothing but starvation outside the Colony. Now answer me! Where have you been hiding, and how many of you are there?"

She continued to gaze at him piteously and shake her head.

"Disobedience, thy name is woman!" growled the captain angrily, because he was beginning to feel a little ridiculous. As if he were, in fact, threatening one of the small hapless monkeys.

"Captain Mark!" she cried suddenly. "Help me!"

"I'll help you!" he snapped, furious that she had noticed his momentary weakness. "Right back to the Colony where your punishment is waiting. The hot brand, hard labor, and all your privileges revoked. And if there are any other runaways skulking about here, the guard patrol will rout them out in short order."

With a suddenness that surprised him, she darted under the lifted spear and threw herself to her knees before him.

"Please!" she begged. "You are the only one who can help me. Not even the Governor dares to question you. And I know I can trust you. Because I know—I know that you are not wicked and cruel like the others. I have

seen you many times, walking the streets of the Colony, tall and straight and proud. And your face—it was not evil. There was—I swear there was a look of compassion in your eyes. Help me now, and I promise your reward shall be great."

The captain's bark of laughter was short and sharp. "By Cosmos!" he swore. "A handsome reward! From you! What are you, a witch, that you can make such daring promises?"

"Yes," she said gravely. "Will you let me tell you about it? I can open the doors to the past and show you all the wonders and mysteries that made our race great. I can prove to you the things that no man living dares to believe. And I can reveal the secrets of unimaginable power."

"You are a very uncomfortable person," said the captain, staring down at her. "I don't wonder that you got yourself consigned to Third Moon. But all this necromancy aside, what I am most interested in knowing is who is with you, and where are they hiding?"

"I'll tell you that, too," she said softly. "I'll tell you everything, if you will only listen. You have nothing to lose, Captain Mark, and everything to gain. Whereas I am staking everything on this one chance. The chance that you will believe me, and be convinced that I deserve your help. If you are not convinced you can still take me back to the Colony for punishment, and what is far worse, the torture of knowing that I brought death and defeat—to my own father. That is who is with me, Captain Mark. My father. No one else."

"Very well. Get up from that silly posture and—"

SHE jumped to her feet and flung herself against him, clutching hysterically at his tunic. Shocked at this

violation of the law and dignity which he represented, he raised a hand to box her ears, but she ducked her head and buried her face against him, clinging all the tighter.

"Oh, please," came her muffled voice. "You don't know what it means at last to have a friend. The one friend I have wanted."

Captain Mark brought his hand down rather more gently than he had intended and shook her by one thin shoulder. "I have not made my decision yet," he reminded her sternly. "Where is this absconding father of yours?"

She freed herself and stepped back, her grimy, tear streaked face still working convulsively. But in her eyes hope had replaced some of the misery.

"He is below on the third level, sir," she replied. "I must tell you that there is a whole underground city beneath these ruins. We have discovered records deposited there in ancient times. My father is deciphering them, but he is weak from lack of food, and it is very tedious work because the recordings are microscopic. But already we have unearthed valuable information about the missing element U-96."

"If you are trying to trick me!" said the captain with sudden violence.

"No, sir. You shall see for yourself. It is the mythical treasury of ancient history."

"What do you know of ancient history? And how is it that you are so well informed on other subjects? Education has been forbidden to females for more than fifty years."

"Yes," she said proudly. "But my father defied the education edict. That is really why we are here. Because he secretly taught the truth to men and women who were denied the privileges of the state schools. You must be aware, Captain Mark, that very few of the

prisoners on Third Moon actually committed the crimes with which they are charged. Whole families have been transported because they were dangerous to the unjust rule of state politicians and the King's sovereignty. Because they dared to object to the brazen usurpation of power by men with the foreign blood of savages in their veins. The King himself had savage ancestors from Planet 9. It is only in the last few generations that his family has assumed the habits of civilization. It is no wonder that corruption and savage oppression are the first laws on Planet 23."

"You seem to forget," said the captain bitterly, "that I am myself in the King's service."

She looked at him without fear and replied, "I do not forget, Captain Mark. Nor do I forget that you bear an ancient honorable name, and have the tall, fair physique of the pure race which once ruled Planet 23, long before the civil wars reduced our people to bickering nationalities. I do not think, sir, that savage tendencies are natural to you."

What a shrewd witch it is, thought the captain with some surprise. Nevertheless this underground city will bear some investigation. I shall have to risk the chance of a trap.

And then, quite unaccountably, lines from the Bolt Song flashed into his mind again.

The Third Bolt on Third Moon is hid,

Within a silver chest . . .

"All right, Dame Justice," he said grimly, "lead on."

"I am the daughter of Jonas Ninth Hager," she said with formal dignity. "My name is Jonas Anne."

"Ah, the eminent and very troublesome archeologist," murmured the cap-

tain. "I knew that he was reported missing from the Colony, but we had not supposed he was physically able to travel so far afoot."

"My father is very strong in spirit," said Anne simply.

"Very well, Mistress Jonas Anne, let us proceed to your father. But if you try any trickery, your name will be Fish-on-a-Spear."

THE long spear, however, proved to be more of a handicap than a help. Anne led the way to the opposite side of the wide, black and white paved court, thence through a maze of tumbled masonry that was apt to give way at the slightest misstep, and paused before a black crevice half hidden under a heap of fallen stone.

"I think it's fairly safe," she said doubtfully. "But please try not to jar anything when you squeeze through."

"You mean to say you expect me to crawl into that crack?"

She nodded solemnly and said, "I'll go first. It isn't so bad once you get in, except it's dark. Are you nervous?"

"Certainly I'm nervous. For all I know you've got a whole crew of blood-thirsty malefactors in there, just waiting to bash my head in."

"There is no one there, sir," she told him gravely. "But the only way you can find out is to go in, isn't it?"

"How painfully true," said the captain with a mock bow. "After you, Mistress."

What with the narrowness of the crevice and the length of his spear, the captain had an uncomfortable time of it. He lowered himself into the blackness feet first, and got stuck at the hips with no solid footing under him. A hand felt for his ankle and he kicked out savagely. The thrust of his kick jerked him through bodily with more speed than he had planned, and he

landed with a jar in a cloud of dust. He picked himself up more surprised than relieved to find that he was uninjured.

"I do wish," he said crossly, "that you had told me you expected to explore a dark cavern. I might have had sense enough to pick up a hand light from my car. Where the hyperblast are you?"

A faint groan reached him from a little distance away. He felt his way toward it over the uneven floor and found a soft, crumpled heap. "What's the matter with you?" he growled. "I thought you knew your way."

"I did—I do," she gasped. "But you kicked me!"

"Oh," said Captain Mark helplessly.

"I was trying to guide your feet, and you—"

"I know. I know. Blast it! I didn't mean— Look here, I'm terribly sorry. Where did I— Where are you hurt?"

"S-stomach!"

"I'll have to get you out of here—"

"No. If I can stand up, I'll be all right. You've got to talk to my father."

It was a queer journey they made through the unfamiliar dark. The captain's spear was left behind so that he could support her more comfortably. Left behind too, was his armor of suspicion. And oddly enough it did not occur to him that he was being unduly solicitous of an escaped criminal. Unintentional as it was, the kick had suddenly altered their relationship.

The way led downward with frequent short flights of stairs, and they came out at length on the dimly lighted third level. Jonas showed no alarm, and only mild surprise, at the sight of his daughter in the arms of the Captain of the Guard. He was a thin man with sharp features and a high forehead. He moved down the long white hall to meet them

with slow, painful steps.

"Father, Captain Mark has come to talk to you," said Anne. "Captain Mark, this is my father, Jonas."

"I am afraid I've injured your daughter," said the captain abruptly. "It was unintentional, but perhaps you'd better examine her to see if anything is broken."

"Is there?" Jonas asked his daughter mildly.

"He kicked me," said Anne bluntly. "In the stomach. But fortunately it was not full."

THE captain's embarrassment went unnoticed as Jonas continued to regard his daughter with mild unconcern. "Perhaps you had better sit down for a while before you return to the science archives," he told her. "The last number you brought me was 457. Please go on from there."

"Yes, father," said Anne, freeing herself from the captain's embrace, and walking down the hall with no difficulty whatever.

The captain stared after her in amazement as she disappeared.

"Why, that little—monkey!" he exclaimed.

"Precisely," said Jonas, taking his arm and guiding him toward a wide archway. "We have a tremendous task ahead of us, but now that you are here, our plans should go forward rapidly."

The archway led to a spacious white-walled room with a huge glass table in the center and comfortable chairs scattered about. A large glass cabinet with many compartments stood at one end of the table. Each compartment contained curious gray metal tubes.

"I regret that the lighting is no better," Jonas continued. "What we have is probably the emergency lighting system with individual controls which

I managed to locate. They undoubtedly had an overall system with a master control which I have been unable to find. You, of course, will be able to do much more in that direction than I could."

Captain Mark halted and stared at Jonas in bewilderment.

"I know," Jonas said quickly. "I am passing over all the obvious facts, because we have so little time, and because of the magnitude of our undertaking. I am an escaped prisoner and you are the King's Commander. I am here because of my political convictions, but so, I think, are you. A young Commander with your background and influence would scarcely isolate himself on Third Moon if he wished to promote his career in the present regime on Planet 23. It is obviously not your ambition to become a party to the tyranny and injustice now being practiced on 23."

"Whatever my personal convictions may be," said Captain Mark stiffly, "it is still my duty to return you and your daughter to the Colony."

"No," said Jonas firmly. "You now have a far higher duty. If you had not arrived so opportunely, I should have managed somehow to contact you. Even if I had to give myself up. Because you are the logical leader for this tremendous enterprise. What would you say if I told you I not only have the secret formula for the fabulous power derived from U-96, but I actually have a large supply of the element? What would you say if I told you the legend of the devastating Third Bolt is true? That it is even now approaching Planet 23 and will become visible in another twelve months? What would you say," Jonas lowered his voice, "if I told you there is still a slim chance that the destructive violence of the Third Bolt can be lessened?"

The room was very still as the two men stared at each other.

"Jonas, are you mad?" asked the captain quietly.

"No, Mark," replied Jonas. "Let us get to work. First, I want you to see the records. They have been perfectly preserved in vacuum tubes, but are difficult to read in their present form. They were placed on microscopic film. There must be a machine somewhere to magnify and reproduce the original documents. We must find that, as well as all the other equipment to bring this dead city to life."

Captain Mark agreed with this wholeheartedly after his first laborious attempts to read the records. Not only were the microscopic words on the film maddening to follow, but the language was strange.

"It is really the pure language of our race," explained Jonas. "That which we use now is a corruption of our original language, and once you become accustomed to the root language you will find it very swift and easy."

"Then perhaps it would save time if you interpret for me what you have already read," said the captain. A wild excitement was leaping in his veins, but the calm, dispassionate attitude of Jonas helped him to keep a grip on the furious emotions surging through him. This—this Third Bolt," he stammered. "I don't quite understand—"

"**M**ANY centuries ago," said Jonas, "three sunbolts were loosed from a tiny planet in a distant solar system. Planet 23 then had a huge observatory and unbelievable equipment for observing far distant parts of the universe. The bolts were observed and the astronomers calculated that the Third Bolt was aimed directly at Planet 23, and was due to arrive in 967 years."

"Impossible!"

"No. Quite natural, as I shall be able to prove, not only by these ancient records, but by my own existence which you will also declare impossible, even while you are looking at me." Jonas paused and stared searchingly at the impatient and thoroughly confused captain. "I must ask you to accept these things until your mind has become adjusted to their reality. You are capable of comprehension. I am sure of that, but if at first you cannot quite believe and trust me, at least believe the records your ancestors have left here for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. There was a man of science, a great astronomer, who bore your name. It was he who signed the first reports of the Third Bolt nearly one thousand years ago, and caused them to be deposited here among the imperishable records of a great civilization. Believe me, they knew what they were doing, those ancient men of science. They calculated correctly the rate of speed at which the Third Bolt was—and still is—traveling. It is due to reach Planet 23 in exactly nineteen months and six days. At that time 23 will have reached a point in its orbit directly between our sun and the approaching bolt, which is traveling on the magnetic beam from our sun."

"Great Cosmos!"

"Precisely. But we also have the means to lessen the destructive force—if we work fast and hard. We have the secret of U-96, which is itself cosmic force. And we have a recorded plan by which that force can be directed at the Third Bolt to diminish its size by splitting off a good part of it. Thus the remaining part which stays on its course and passes through the atmosphere of Planet 23, while it will be devastating, will not be completely catastrophic."

Captain Mark muttered to himself

incoherently for many minutes. "But it's true!" he cried at last. "All that—ancient history, superstitions, legends—all of it is true!"

"Yes," said Jonas gravely. "The Third Bolt is to wipe out wicked men—remember? It will do precisely that. In the fiery violence of its passing, the present political regime on Planet 23 will be wiped out. But the planet will not be destroyed. There may even be some life left in remote parts. But in any case, we have a population here on Third Moon of—how many?"

"Close to two million altogether. But that means—it means revolt against the King's government—now!" exclaimed Captain Mark. "It means we must take over control of Third Moon, suppress the Governor . . ."

"I am glad," said Jonas dryly, "that you were so quick to see that. We cannot, of course, allow this great secret to fall into the wrong hands. What is done, must be done by us—you and me. We have the materials and the labor at hand."

"You also have food!" announced Anne, entering with a large shallow receptacle. "You may think your powers include the ability to do without eating, but I do not wish to continue the experiment another minute. There!" She set the metal tray down on the table and the savory odors of a hot and very appetizing meal assailed the two men.

"Where in the universe!" exclaimed Jonas.

"Believe it or not," said Anne smugly, "it came out of the science archives. They had a wonderful method of dehydrating and concentrating food in vacuum containers. The instant the container is opened the action of the atmosphere supplies the heat and moisture, and there you are—a complete hot meal!"

"You're wonderful!" declared Cap-

tain Mark, sampling a fluffy biscuit.

"Well, it took a little practice," Anne admitted. "The first three or four containers I opened sort of—erupted, and got all over everything. No. Don't worry, father. None of your precious records are spoiled, and I'll clean up the mess. Gladly . . . after I've eaten."

THE strange activity on Third Moon proceeded furiously for nearly a year. Although the population understood very little of what was going on, they worked enthusiastically under the new leader, Mark Third Carvel, who had suddenly imprisoned the vicious Governor and all his staff, and declared the prisoners free. The real criminal elements were then systematically weeded out, and strange tales were told of their fate. Some thought they were dropped into space from the queer ships the leader was building.

And those ships! What made them run? They simply vanished in a flash from their moorings, and then in a few days or a few weeks they were back with hundreds of passengers—friends and relatives of the former prisoners, smuggled from Planet 23! The passengers told ecstatic stories of the swift journey through space in luxurious comfort. A person just couldn't believe his eyes and ears any more. And of course all those who might have told some of the inside story had been isolated in the palace buildings.

The palace of Mark, the Liberator, was built over the old ruins of ancient buildings, and there were rumors about that, too. Some said there was a vast cellar beneath it which extended to the very center of Third Moon to tap the source of some mysterious power. It was not entirely impossible that the leader had imprisoned the Third Bolt down there, and was using its terrible power for good purposes.

This story was discounted, however, when the real Third Bolt appeared in the sky and the news was made public. Not many had access to the big telescope atop the tallest palace building, but after a little while it could be seen at night with the naked eye. It looked like a tiny comet, with a tail that kept getting longer and longer, and wider and wider. And finally every one realized that the thing was growing bigger and bigger as it came closer and closer.

Then for days the people were very still, going about their business with a feeling of awe. In fact they were most unnaturally courteous and conscientious, and all of them agreed that they were eternally grateful to the leader for keeping them on Third Moon where they were safe. Even though many of the bolder ones had clamored to be returned to Planet 23 when they were freed. Now they began to understand how truly great the Great Liberator was, and how much reverence they owed him.

As a matter of fact, the Great Liberator was just then in a cold sweat. He was facing Jonas in one of the smaller rooms of his palace, and he was stammering in a very unleaderlike way.

"But blast it! It's all so—so darn silly!" he said. "They think I'm some kind of magician or—or a god of some sort! And actually it's you who—"

"Precisely," said Jonas drily. "However, I do not happen to be the type of romantic figure capable of capturing and holding the public attention. As for publishing the true facts of our past and future accomplishments, you must see yourself that it would be a thankless and quite futile task. These people are not ready for such revelations. They must be educated, and it may take generations. You cannot spring such highly technical scientific explanations on a people who have lived on legends and

superstitions for several hundred years. If we deceive them with your magnificence and omnipotence, it is for their own good. And finally, it makes them happy. What more do you want?"

"I may be selfish," declared Mark, "but I very much want to feel less like a fool. After all, if you could make me understand, I don't see why—"

"Good," chuckled Jonas. "It is an excellent omen."

"What is?"

"The fact that you have this capacity for humility," said Jonas more soberly. "As the future ruler of Planet 23, and incidentally of all the other planets in our solar system, your humility, which I have no doubt you will hand on to your—er offspring, is a very valuable trait. It was the lack of it that caused the downfall of your ancestors."

"YES," said Mark slowly. "So you have explained to me more than once. My ancestors. What about your own ancestors. You once hinted to me that you came from some mysterious or impossible origin. Now that you have accomplished this much with your unbelievable powers, I think you owe me an explanation. Especially inasmuch as Anne and I—that is, I had some hope of asking Anne—"

"Excellent. I have had the same hope, Mark." Jonas put his long, clever hands to his face and drew them away slowly and regretfully. "I am, of course, no longer young. But if our children—yours and mine, can carry on the task, perhaps some day—Ah, well. I shall tell you more about that later. For the present, the task is still in our hands. As for my being able to explain these inexplicable wonders to you, it is because you happen to be possessed of a very far-reaching imagination, amounting almost to vision. Also you have an inherent conviction of things unseen. It

is bred in you, and fortunately your strain has not been too much corrupted. You cannot, of course, say that for many of your contemporaries, although we have been able to uncover an unusual number of individuals with advanced intelligence among those imprisoned by the King and his jealous advocates. They make excellent and easily trained workers. Useful in their place, and well satisfied with it, but not capable of complete knowledge and power. Complete knowledge would result, I think, in a kind of frenzied anarchy—which would not last very long. The destruction would be complete and final."

"Very well," sighed Mark resignedly. "I shall continue this fool's masquerade, and you shall continue to be the power behind the throne. Would you mind telling me, most powerful and mysterious motive force, what I am to do next?"

"There is no reason to be bitter about it," said Jonas mildly. "You have fulfilled your part far better than I could have hoped. Your understanding of men, and your talent for leadership is even greater than you, yourself think. The quick coup which disposed of the Governor and all his retainers was brilliant. Not so much because I had furnished you with atomic weapons for a small force of quickly trained men, but because you picked your men so unerringly. The spies you chose and trained for operation on Planet 23 are doing wonders. The crews of your fleet of communication ships are no less remarkable. And your simple strategy of allowing any old-style escape ships from 23 to land, and then sorting out the passengers by rigid examination, also shows a calm understanding of the unprecedented situation."

"All of which is, I suppose, very flattering," declared Mark. "But it is also

a trifle tiresome. My query was: What next? Or would you like me to expound at length on the wonders you have achieved in supervising the resurrection of the amazing city which lies beneath us, with all its industries and laboratories and so on?"

"No, Mark. I neither deserve nor require praise for my efforts. Such knowledge as I have was handed down to me by my grandfather. A remarkable man. As for what comes next—in five days we shall begin blasting at the Third Bolt from one of the six towers we have erected. I am very much afraid our blasts will increase the panic already raging on 23, but it cannot be helped. Your communication ships can continue their secret trips for another ten days by circling far out to the opposite side of the planet. After that the force of the Third Bolt will begin to make itself felt and all traffic must cease."

"So soon?" said Mark tightly. "It's going to be terrible to have to watch the planet go."

"It won't go entirely," Jonas consoled him. "At least we have been in time to save something."

THE first attempt to split off a portion of the cannonballing Third Bolt was only partially successful. The photographed result showed only a long trail of sparks shooting off the right side. The giant tower from which the cosmic beam was aimed collapsed from the force of the blast and the remaining five towers were hastily reinforced. Mark was depressed. Only he and Jonas knew that if they failed, it meant the end for them as well as for Planet 23. It was in this mood that Jonas found him, pacing the huge library of the palace. The thousand year old records and reports of Mark the Astronomer were scattered over one of

the massive tables.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Jonas inquired.

"I have made a decision," said Mark. "If we come through this thing safely, I intend to make a serious study of astronomy."

"Why astronomy?"

"Because," declared Mark decisively, "there is something I very much want to find out. I don't mind being shot at, even by an insignificant little planet in an inferior solar system, but I'd blasted well like to know what in the name of Cosmos they were shooting at us for!"

"Very well," said Jonas. "Perhaps this is the time to tell you."

"Tell me what? Have you been keeping some still more frightful catastrophe from me? Great Burning Sun! Now that we are on the brink of oblivion—"

"We are still a good ways from oblivion," replied Jonas mildly. "Planet 23 will stay on its course, and so shall we. What I have to tell you is how and why the Third Bolt got its start, and incidentally to clear up my own origin. I have in my possession copies of records from that small, distant planet which unleashed the Bolt. My grandfather brought them. Fortunately, he was wise enough not to reveal himself to the ignorant tyrants then ruling Planet 23. They were incapable of believing him, and he would have been put to death. Instead he sought sanctuary in the mountainous section of the Second Continent. Here he met my grandmother, and spent his life in research and in drawing up careful plans to be followed by my father and subsequently by me. That is why I became an archeologist. Because my grandfather was convinced that the intelligence that once ruled Planet 23 must have left records of their great knowledge."

"Here, wait a space!" gasped Mark. "You are going much too fast. Are you trying to tell me that your grandfather resembled the men on Planet 23, that he traveled an endless distance through space from that same tiny planet which gave off the Third Bolt, that—"

"Precisely," said Jonas calmly. "He traveled in a strange spheroid which was shot into the light beam from our great sun, and sped along that beam until it struck Planet 23, much as the Third Bolt is doing, except that the spheroid was much faster and picked up no extraneous matter. The men on that distant planet, which they call Earth, had realized at last the nature of the destructive force which they had loosed. My grandfather came on a mission of mercy, to do what he could to save Planet 23, or at least to warn any intelligent beings he found there. It had been his intention to return to Earth, but the spheroid was damaged by ignorant vandals, and so he remained. And it is my good fortune to be able to complete his mission."

"Earth," said Mark in bewilderment. "Earth. What a queer thing to call a planet. What queer men they must be."

"Not so very different than the men on 23," said Jonas.

"We at least have never tried to destroy a planet," said Mark indignantly.

"Neither did they. A thousand years ago there were savage wars raging on Earth, because the people were still in a primitive state. In their search for newer and more devastating weapons, they discovered an element very similar to our U-96, and through experiment they solved the secret of cosmic energy. That is how it happened that the three sunbolts were shot from the planet. The first was a test bolt. The remaining two were used to blast a war-making country into submission. The fact that

the Third Bolt was aimed directly into the magnetic beam from our sun was pure accident. My grandfather tried to rectify the matter, and his attempt has not been entirely unsuccessful."

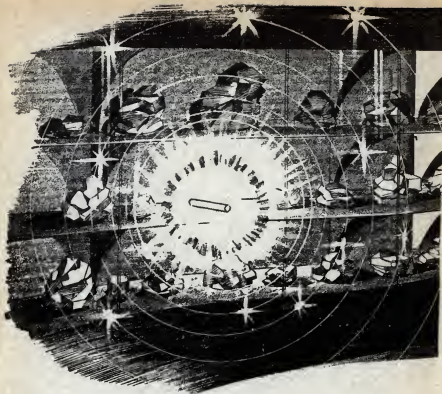
"No," said Mark slowly, staring at Jonas in wonderment. "We are not finished yet. You have restored my confidence, you strange descendant of the queer Earth people."

LATER that night the second blast was aimed at the Third Bolt with more success. Large fiery chunks were broken off and disintegrated in space. The blasts continued at intervals until only a fraction of the original bolt reached the upper atmosphere of Planet 23. The spectacle was blinding to those who watched from Third Moon. The searing, blasting passage of the bolt lasted only six-and-a-half hours, but it left a vast scar extending more than half-way around the planet. Hours after the last flare had vanished, a vast prolonged roar was heard and felt on Third Moon, and four days later the terrific storms began and lasted for many months.

The people on Third Moon were terrified by the violent and unpredictable upheaval of the elements, but Jonas declared they were mild and beneficial compared to what might have been. The storms did, in fact, change the barren surface of Third Moon to a fertile paradise in a few short years. Which was fortunate, since Planet 23 was virtually uninhabitable for many years after the Third Bolt had kept its appointment. Vast areas were scourged and burned, rivers had vanished, mountains were dispersed, and earthquakes and tidal waves spread further destruction.

A few weeks after the last of the violent storms had died down, Mark spoke to Anne about the future. His

(continued on page 117)



SECRET of the YELLOW CRYSTAL

by Guy Archette

DENNING first entered my life in 1912. He flew into the old Crimson Valley mining camp one afternoon as Art Finch and I were climbing into our plastotherm air-suits for a trip to the smelter. We caught sight of the flitterjet through the cabin

windows even before we heard the faint buzzing sound of its engine. It circled a few times then glided to a landing some two-hundred feet away.

I glanced at Art. He was grinning eagerly. "Visitors!" he said.

"Now isn't that nice?" I rejoined, a



**There was something mighty
peculiar about the yellow bit
of crystal—and dangerous . . . !**

bit more sarcastically, perhaps, than Art deserved. I went quickly to the rack where our rifles hung. I handed Art his and got the mechanism of mine ready for business.

Art watched me, the grin gone from his face. "Tom—you don't think . . .?"

"I don't," I told him. "I'm just playing safe. A lot of people have been coming here, to Mars, lately, and some of them aren't what you could call desirable additions. And we *are* mining gold in almost pure chunks, you know." Motioning to Art, I went over to one of the windows, where I waited for the occupants of the flitterjet to emerge.

These precautions weren't just a lot of derring-do. Those who have read anything of the early days of settlement on the Moon, either in historical or story form, will recall it as a period of blood-shed and villainy second only to the frontier days of the western United States. The Moon, of course, now tamed by the advance of civilization, and almost fully exploited, serves merely as a jumping-off place for rockets to Mars and Venus. But Mars of the present is as much a frontier as the Moon of the past, and remembering the history of the latter, I didn't intend to take chances with strangers.

Crimson Valley was probably the loneliest and most forsaken spot on Mars. Bleak brown hills enclosed the mine on all sides, as though it were cupped in a great grimy calloused palm. Overhead the purple sky hung low and heavy and cold. The valley floor was covered with the usual rust-tinted sand, and was strewn with rock outcroppings, rounded and worn by the erosion effects—gone now—of wind and water. Here the brooding silence of Mars seemed all the more subtly menacing, as though the encircling hills were jealous guardians over the valley, watching every move, listening to every word.

The location of the mine was thus ideal for a surprise attack by outlaws. The gold we were taking out alone offered sufficient temptation.

As I watched, the cockpit cowl of the flitterjet was shoved back. One after the other, two men crawled out on the stubby wings and jumped to the sand. I relaxed as I saw they were unarmed. They stood there, gazing around the camp. Then they started to walk forward.

I was by no means assured that the two strangers were entirely harmless. I told Art, "I'm going out to see what they want. You stay by the door and keep me covered."

I stood my rifle against the wall, took a deep breath, and left the cabin. The two men waved and quickened their advance when they saw me appear. More out of politeness than anything else, I waved back and walked forward to meet them.

They had the transparent spherical helmets of their air-suits thrown back in the hardy fashion of Mars-conditioned veterans, but judging from the color of their faces, they were recent arrivals from Earth. One was tall and seemed slender, the other short and obviously heavy-built. Something about their faces, when finally they stood before me, carried a haunting sense of the familiar, but memory of where I'd seen them before would not come at once. It was the taller of the two who did the talking.

"This is Mine No. 1 of the Mars branch of Herrick Mines and Metals, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's right," I said.

HE UNFASTENED a pocket of his coverall and fumbled within it. His features were thin and oddly boyish. His eyes were gray, the lashes dark and heavy. His brows almost met across

the bridge of his short, finely chiseled nose. He had full, sensitive lips, and his dark hair was tumbled about his forehead as though from repeated nervous combing with his fingers. He said:

"I have a letter of introduction to Superintendent Thomas Grayson from Neil Herrick."

"I'm Thomas Grayson," I told him.

The tall man looked me over and his lips lifted in a smile which emphasized the curious youthfulness of his face. "You're younger than I thought you'd be. I rather expected a bearded older." He had the letter out now and extended it to me. "I'm William Denning. This"—indicating his companion—"is Professor Stephen Partrey."

I shook hands. "Pleased to meet you," I said quite truthfully. I remembered them now, William Denning in particular. He and Partrey had gained a measure of fame by having been on several of the early expeditions to Mars. Denning, however, had furthered himself in public recognition through several books on Martian archaeology and exploration, all immensely popular. I'd read those books as a kid in my late 'teens, and the impression they'd left on me of mystery and vanished grandeur is something which hasn't left me even yet.

Partrey had also written much material on Mars. I'd read little of it, though, since it was the scholarly sort, possessed of academic rather than popular interest. This fact, I think set Denning and Partrey apart even more than their disparity of build. Partrey was a hard-headed realist who dealt solely with facts. Denning, on the other hand, was a dreamer who went beyond facts and into the realm of mysticism. It was this quality, added to a lilting prose style, which made his books so fascinating.

I was not a little confused at being

so abruptly confronted with two celebrities. And overwhelmingly curious, too. Of all places on Mars, what were Denning and Partrey doing here, at the mine?

The letter of introduction from Neil Herrick should explain things, I decided. Conscious of the gaze of the two scientists, I opened it. In essence, the letter acknowledged Denning and Partrey, and explained that as they intended doing research work in the Crimson Valley locality, I was to let them use the camp as a base of operations. I was also to extend such aid and courtesy as would not directly interfere with the operation of the mine. I grinned inwardly at this, since it was so characteristic of Neil Herrick. Even when it came to lending a helping hand in the cause of science, business came first, last, and foremost.

Denning asked, "Will this arrangement be all right with you?"

"Very much so," I answered quickly. "The mine is a lonely place, and visitors are always welcome—especially visitors such as yourself and Professor Partrey."

Partrey waved a gloved hand in a gesture of disclamation. "Nonsense, young man," he said gruffly. "I wager you'll tire of us soon enough." But I could see that he had been pleased, for his small, deep-set blue eyes twinkled. His face was broad with a round nubbin-like nose. He had very thick wiry hair, shot with gray, and a short beard covered his chin and upper lip.

DENNING'S responding grin vanished as though erased by a sudden thought. He jerked a thumb toward the flitterjet. "We've a lot of junk packed in there. If you'll show us where to store it..."

"You can leave your equipment in the ship for the present, if you have no

immediate need of it," I suggested. "Later I'll have a couple of the men bring it in." I gestured toward the main cabin, and the two scientists fell into step beside me.

"You seem to be a small outfit," Denning said, glancing around. "Somehow, I always had the idea that a mine was a big, bustling place."

"There's almost a dozen of us here," I said. "It may surprise you to know that this number is considered quite large. Most of the work, you see, is carried out by automatic machinery. Very little if any human muscular effort is involved."

"Machines," Partrey chuckled. "Always machines. Even on Mars."

"Help is hard to get," I told him. "Such few laborers who are willing to come to Mars at all demand sky-high hourly rates for their services. That's understandable, though, because work under Martians conditions of atmosphere, temperature, and gravity is very difficult at best. Machines are the only solution." I admitted, "I designed much of the machinery we're using here. It's all highly specialized equipment, and there would be marked differences in efficiency if it were used anywhere else—Earth, say, or the Moon. I was a Mars bug from 'way back, and a college training in engineering gave me a few ideas."

"Which, I think, explains why you're a young fellow where I'd expected a middle-aged man at best," Denning commented with a grin.

Partrey said, "Neil Herrick mentioned that you're taking out gold here."

I nodded. "Mars is rich in gold-bearing ores, as you no doubt know. Somehow the ancient Martians never attached the importance to gold that we have."

"Nor for a great many other things," Denning added softly. "They were a

strange race."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I've visited a few deserted cities. There are several near the mine. Crimson Valley is one of a chain of valleys, and many of them have cities."

Denning glanced at me, his gray eyes turned dark and brooding. Then he smiled faintly. "That's why Professor Partrey and I are here—because of the deserted cities, that is. This part of Mars contains more than any other. The proximity of the mine was a welcome convenience."

"Oh," I said. "You intend to explore the cities nearby?" I tried to give the impression of being only politely interested, but I guess my actual deep-seated curiosity was all too apparent.

Denning nodded slowly, eyes dark again. "Professor Partrey and I intend to learn what happened to the ancient Martians—why and how they vanished so completely as they did. For Professor Partrey it is the last attempt. He isn't young anymore, and Martian conditions are too much of a strain for an extended stay. For myself, however, it is just the beginning. I'm going to learn what happened to the Martian race. I'll never rest until I have the answer."

WE HAD reached the main cabin by this time. I pulled open the outer door to find Art Finch standing within the lock, fingering his rifle as if he didn't know what to do with it. Denning and Partrey glanced at Art, at the rifle, and then at each other.

I thought fast. "Going out for target practice again?" I asked.

Art nodded a bit too quickly. "Yeah. Yeah, that's it. But since we've got visitors, I guess I'll postpone it." He grinned weakly.

I introduced Art to Denning and Partrey and explained, "Art is crazy about target practice. Goes in for it

almost every day." The two scientists seemed to accept this somewhat dubiously, and mentally I cursed Art for having remained at the door long after it was perfectly obvious there wasn't going to be any trouble.

In an effort to cover up the all-too-apparent falsity of the situation, I gestured Denning and Partrey into the cabin and nudged Art ungently after them. Art stumbled and looked back over his shoulder to give me benefit of a scowl that was eloquent of injured feelings. Art was a perfectly good mining engineer, but he never quite understood certain things unless they were carefully explained to him.

I got Denning and Partrey settled, and then, excusing myself, I left the cabin to get things organized. I saw my foremen, Ira Harker at the mine, and Slim Newcomb at the smelter, appraised each of them of the fact that we had visitors, and left them with orders to take a few men and unload the equipment from the flitterjet. Next on my list was Sam Wah, our Chinese cook, who promised to outdo himself for the benefit of our guests.

That night we had what might be called a little party. Sam Wah performed a culinary miracle with his stock of canned, dried, and concentrated foods, and as a sort of topper, I dug a quart bottle of scotch out of hiding.

Harker and Newcomb were somewhat awed by Denning and Partrey and didn't have much to say, but Art and I managed to keep the conversational ball rolling. We discussed news from Earth for a while, and then Denning switched the talk around to something which seemed to be uppermost in his mind—the deserted cities.

"I've been wondering, Grayson, if you've ever noticed any aircraft passing overhead, in the direction of the cities

beyond the valley. There isn't much of a law enforcement organization on Mars yet, and I've been worried about looters. The carrying away of certain things might make difficult if not impossible the work of Professor Partrey and myself."

I shook my head. "I've never noticed any aircraft about, and neither have the others here, or they'd have mentioned it. Anyway, I don't see that there's anything in the deserted cities worth the taking."

Denning smiled faintly. "From our viewpoint, no. But there may be many things in the deserted cities right now which among the ancient Martians were considered of great value."

"In other words," Partrey put in, "it's a case of two cultures being so utterly dissimilar that the people of one fail to appreciate that of the other."

Denning nodded slowly. "A very queer culture, that of the ancient Martians. Perhaps the greatest mystery, aside from their complete disappearance, is how they traveled and communicated. Mars never had any oceans to speak of. Great rivers and lakes, yes, but no oceans in the sense with which we of Earth are familiar. In relation to its size, then, Mars always had more land surface than the Earth. And this was never at any time densely populated, since from the number and size of the cities, the Martian race was not a large one.

"The cities are widely scattered and usually very far apart, mostly in deep valleys and along canal bottoms, sites which retained more air and water than those of higher altitude. Now the strange thing about all this is that there are no roads connecting the cities. There never were any roads. The ancient Martians possessed no surface vehicles, aircraft, or boats. Yet the cities show an astonishing uniformity

of culture. A city on one side of the planet, for example, is very much like that on the other. Just as artifacts, utensils, and design and detail of buildings and furnishings of one city resemble in every slightest respect those in another city several thousand miles away."

"But the Martians must have communicated *some way!*" I burst out. "Perhaps by a method similar to our present day television."

DENNING shook his tousled head with emphatic finality. He leaned forward over the table, gray eyes intense. "The ancient Martians did not have television, or anything even remotely resembling it. Their culture seems never to have developed a mechanical side—no instruments, devices, or machines of any kind. In examination of several cities on previous expeditions, Professor Partrey and I found simple tools and utensils—but little else. To be sure, there was a large number of objects of crystal or quartz whose purpose or function we could not guess, but except for differences in form, color, and size, these were just so many chunks of mineral, entirely without meaning.

"The Martians never discovered the uses of the wheel and the lever. They never came anywhere near the telescope or the microscope. There is nothing to show that they made even the most casual gesture toward such sciences as biology, physics, or astronomy. They do not seem to have made the slightest effort toward understanding themselves or the world in which they lived. They left nothing written behind—if they possessed writing at all. No books, paintings, statues—nothing. Their houses are the simplest kind of single-storied, stone-brick structures, little more than glorified huts."

Partrey took up. "But make no mistake, the ancient Martians possessed what can undeniably be called a civilization. You've seen a few of their deserted cities." He nodded at me. "Their homes may have been simple according to our standards, but they are clearly of an advanced stage of development, gathered together into what once were large, park-like communities. The communities had to be supplied with food, and therefore, obviously, there were farms, orchards, and ranches. Also, there must have been some sort of social and political organization. And there must have been commerce of a sort, though it's difficult to understand how this took place. There are no evidences of how the ancient Martians traveled, communicated, and transported materials—in spite of the fact that there are indications that they did."

"If we knew," Denning said, "perhaps we would know also the answer as to how the Martians disappeared."

"Couldn't a war have been responsible?" I asked. "Or a plague?"

Denning shook his head with slow emphasis. "It couldn't have been either. There are no evidences of destruction, no slightest signs of a disaster of any kind. Nor could the natural dying out of a race be used as an explanation. The condition of the cities shows that desertion occurred abruptly and simultaneously."

A silence fell. The room filled with a *queerness* that made it seem strangely hollow and cold. I glanced at Denning. He returned my gaze with a kind of somber contemplation, his youthful features shadowed and tense.

I felt a stirring almost of pity as I looked at Denning. His and Partrey's mission seemed hopeless.

And then, to my intense surprise, Denning said, "Perhaps it isn't entirely

hopeless."

I STARED foolishly. I hadn't uttered a word—yet Denning had seemed to know the thought that passed through my mind.

Partrey chuckled softly. He glanced from Denning to myself with what was apparently a complete understanding of the situation. He said, "Professor Denning is a telepath—that is, he has the rare ability to catch the thoughts of others. But he doesn't like to have it known. Terribly touchy about it, in fact."

Denning gestured with something of irritation. "They made a big fuss over me when I was a kid because of that. I hated it. Made me feel like a freak. When I saw that I wasn't going to be given a chance to lead a normal life, I hid away until everyone forgot about me. I even had to change my name."

"Say—you must be James Barrett!" Harker exclaimed abruptly.

Denning nodded with a slowness that obviously was reluctance. "Yes, that's my real name."

"They called you the Telepathic Prodigy," Harker said. "I remember now." He grinned around the table, and ran a gnarled hand through his stiff thatch of white hair, a mannerism of his in moments of self-consciousness.

Denning smiled ruefully. "Well, the cat's out of the bag. I don't like to have people know about my ability, because people are never quite at ease with a person whom they know is able to read their thoughts. Most people are ashamed of their thoughts, you know. But I've developed what might be called a knack of using my receptivity only when I want to. I might add that I can also transmit thoughts—but don't form the impression that this makes me a mental marvel. It's just that—merely an ability, like being able to per-

form intricate calculations mentally or wriggle your ears. Other than being able to wriggle his ears or perform intricate calculations mentally, the possessor of either of these talents isn't good for much else. Which, I hope, explains why I am merely an archaeologist instead of dictator of Earth."

Partrey chuckled again. "I didn't intend to give away a secret. I just thought that forewarned is forearmed. Professor Denning is often absent-minded in the use of his knack, and this causes embarrassing situations among the uninitiated. We're going to be here for some time, you know."

Denning's ability aroused a heated though good-natured discussion of telepathy in general. Denning tried to prove that the human race was becoming telepathic, whereas Finch and Harker contended that it was merely a gift which cropped out at infrequent intervals. Nothing really was settled, but I noticed that Denning's telepathic powers had been accepted matter-of-factly and without reservation.

Conversation stretched its verbal arms and yawned. By a kind of tacit agreement, we went our separate ways to bed.

In the morning Denning and Partrey left in the flitterjet for a reconnaissance jaunt. It seems that they wished to fix in mind the location of the deserted cities beyond the valley before they started any actual research work. Their stay at the mine was to be an indefinite one, but if it was all right with Neil Herrick, it was all right with me.

Anyway, the week which followed showed clearly that if I'd ever had any fears that Denning's and Partrey's visit would cause complications, they would have been quite groundless. The two were gone the greater part of each day, returning always just a short time before the sun vanished beyond the hori-

zon in the abrupt way it does on Mars. They were usually too weary to make much of an attempt at conversation, and Art and I let it go at that—without some disappointment, however.

It kept on like that for more than a month. Then came sudden tragedy.

ONE day the flitterjet returned to camp during the afternoon instead of shortly before sunset. I happened to be leaving the mine when it landed. For the craft to return so soon struck me at once as unusual, and instinctively I knew something was wrong.

As I walked toward the flitterjet, Denning climbed out. He didn't jump to the sand. Instead, he reached back into the cockpit and hauled at something within. In another moment I saw what it was—Partrey, his stocky figure very still and limp in its plastotherm air-suit. I ran the rest of the way in great bounds.

Denning had lowered Partrey's form to the sand by the time I reached him. He turned to face me, his boyish features aged with grief.

"What . . . what happened?" I blurted.

Denning's lips moved, but words did not come at once. Then, "Professor Partrey is dead. I'll explain later. Right now help me carry him into the cabin."

The news came as a great shock to me. For a moment all I could do was stare. Denning placed his hands under the armpits of Partrey's body and waited with a stolid patience that spoke of emotions so exhausted by sorrow that my delay was the least of the things that no longer mattered. I woke into dazed motion and grasped the ankles of the dead scientist. Between us, Denning and I carried the body over the sand and into the cabin, where we placed it upon a bed.

Art Finch was in the cabin. He had

obviously noticed our approach, for his widened eyes looked questions at me.

"Partrey's dead," I told Art. "I don't know how it happened—yet." I looked expectantly at Denning. He removed his coverall with fumbling hands and sank into a chair. His gray eyes were bloodshot.

"It was an accident," Denning whispered. "An accident—a combination of events. . . . Lord, I should have guessed it before. It was in front of me all the time. What a blind fool I was!" He passed a hand over his face, then looked at me with sudden clarity. "Those crystal and quartz objects—they mean something. I should have guessed that. The things were all over—in every house we ever examined."

"But what happened to Partrey?" I demanded. "How did he die?"

Denning moistened his lips. "We were in one of the deserted cities beyond the valley. Professor Partrey was examining a crystal object which he'd taken from a house we'd just left. I was looking at it, too. No—not exactly looking at it, for I was using my mind. I don't know how to explain it, but you know of my ability. There are some things I do unconsciously that I don't understand myself. I was looking at the thing, and . . . well, I can modulate the transmission of my thoughts in somewhat the same way you can modulate the tones of your voice. I was doing that, entirely unaware of it, when suddenly the crystal object flamed into Professor Partrey's face. I was knocked off my feet, but not by any physical force. It was a mental thing. A hand seemed to grip my mind and wrench at it, and then I was sitting in the sand. Professor Partrey had fallen, too, but he never moved again. He was dead. His face wasn't burned. There wasn't so much as a mark upon him—but he was dead."

Denning sucked air into his lungs as though he had forgotten to breathe. "I don't know what spared me, unless it's some condition of mind of which my telepathic ability is only one direct manifestation. The mind is an unexplored maze at best. It may be that some people possess strange powers lacking in others. Or perhaps we all have these powers, but some in greater degree. I don't know. . . .

"Anyway, that crystal thing—it was pale blue and cylindrical, about six inches long and an inch or so in diameter. Professor Partrey carried it away because we had never found anything of that size and shape before. Most of the objects are quite standardized, you see. Cubes, and pyramids, and spheres, and the like. The entire gamut, in fact, of solid geometrical shapes. They mean something—I know that now. I have a dim glimmering of the truth."

DENNING'S voice was followed by a thick, strained silence. Realization came to me that something would have to be done about the situation. I mulled it over, and shortly I got a plan of procedure rounded out in my mind.

"Partrey's death will raise questions on Earth," I told Denning. "The authorities won't be likely to accept your story at face value. You'll have to have legal evidence from this end fully attesting to the fact that Partrey's death was an accident. This is what we can do: For the present we'll bury Partrey in a shallow grave. It's below freezing here most of the time, and we don't have to worry about decomposition. A company freighter will arrive in another few weeks to pick up our quarterly output. There'll be a doctor along who gives us a regular check-over. He'll perform an autopsy and make out a death certificate. Then I'll write up a coroner's report, and have it properly

approved and witnessed. That way you won't have any trouble when you return to Earth."

Denning nodded dully. "Thanks," he muttered.

"One more thing," I said. "That crystal cylinder. Did you bring it with you?"

"No. I left it where Professor Partrey had dropped it. I . . . I was afraid to touch it."

"I can understand that, but I'd like to have you find the thing. We'll need it at the inquest."

Later Art and I wrapped the body of Partrey in a blanket and carried it outside, where we dug a shallow grave in the sand. I used a rock for a marker, and that for the time being was that.

Denning was silent and morose for the next few days. He remained in the cabin, pacing the floor like a caged beast, or staring into nothingness for hours on end. Apparently, he felt his responsibility in Partrey's death keenly.

Then one morning Denning roused from his brooding and left camp in the flitterjet. He returned some three hours later, joining Art and myself in the main cabin, where we were preparing reports in anticipation of the arrival of the freighter.

Denning placed a crystal cylinder upon my desk. "Here it is," he said.

"The thing that killed Partrey?" I asked.

Denning nodded gravely. I edged away from the object as though it were an atomic bomb ready to explode. Not that it looked dangerous. It was really the most harmless-looking thing you could possibly imagine. Just a transparent cylinder of pale blue crystal. Through it I could see, magnified, the writing on the papers that lay on my desk.

Denning pulled off his coverall and sat down in a nearby chair. He spoke

softly. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about all those crystal and quartz objects which Professor Partrey and I found in the cities. I think I know what they are. If I'm right, it'll explain many baffling aspects of Martian culture."

I glanced at the crystal cylinder. "I don't see how that would explain anything," I told Denning.

"No?" Denning leaned forward, his face suddenly intense. "Suppose the cylinder were a weapon—a weird, incredible weapon, activated by a certain intensity of thought-force. What would that make the other crystal objects? Heating and lighting units, perhaps, communication devices, any number of gadgets of a household or industrial nature." He fell silent. The intensity of his gaze turned inward, became introspective, as though his thoughts were continuing where his words had left off. Abruptly he stood up. "I'd rather not say any more about this—at least until I'm sure. I may be like a man, you know, who though never having seen an ocean, infers from a drop of water that there are such things as oceans. Whether or not the deduction does him any good depends on his finding an ocean to prove it." Denning smiled in a tired sort of way and left the room.

I GLANCED at Art. He returned my gaze with a look of mild bewilderment. Apparently he didn't know quite what to make of Denning's little flight of fancy, and as far as that goes, I wasn't so certain myself.

More to keep Art quiet than anything else, I got back to work on the reports. I didn't want him asking questions which I wasn't prepared to answer.

Denning resumed his now solitary trips in the flitterjet. As before, he returned always just a short time before

nightfall. His activities — whatever they were — kept him broodingly preoccupied.

The company freighter arrived at the scheduled time. I saw the bullion stowed aboard and got a signed receipt from Captain Nate Barrows. Then I submitted with the others at the mine to a physical check-up by Doc Saunderson. These routine procedures over, I brought up the matter of Partrey's death.

Saunderson conducted an autopsy on Partrey's exhumed remains, and later we held a kind of rough and ready inquest. Denning repeated word for word the story which he had previously told Art and myself. The cylinder of pale blue crystal was exhibited. A suggestion by one of the jurymen that Denning prove the cylinder actually possessed the properties ascribed to it was vetoed as being too much of a risk. Saunderson then gave a report of the autopsy which, stripped of its medical terminology, explained Partrey's death as due to a complete disruption of the cells of the brain. Under questioning, Saunderson firmly excluded any possibility of foul play. After a short debate, the jury turned in a verdict of accidental death.

I wrote out a coroner's report which Captain Barrows volunteered to see reached the proper authorities on Earth. Partrey was buried again, this time in a secluded part of the valley and with all due ceremonies. Shortly after, the freighter left. It was our only contact with the outside world, and we saw it off with various degrees of wistfulness.

Life at the mine settled back down to normal. The necessity had arisen for a new shaft to be sunk, and for over a month Art and I were busy with this. Denning, as far as contact with him went, was a wraith who came and left

in the flitterjet.

Then one morning Denning paused as he was about to leave on one of his daily trips. He eyed me in a speculative sort of way and seemed to reach a decision. He asked, "How would you like to go with me today? I've made some interesting discoveries, and I thought you might like to see them."

"I certainly would," I told him. I climbed into my air-suit before he had time to change his mind. Leaving Art in charge of things for that day, I followed Denning out of the cabin and into the flitterjet.

Denning took the craft up, circling a few times for altitude, then setting out for the valley rim toward the north. Shortly the valley was behind us, and we buzzed over a great plateau. Denning was silent, lost in some mysterious thoughts of his own. I was curious as to our destination, but I did not disturb him.

I WATCHED Denning covertly. This was the first opportunity I'd ever had really to study him, and now the realization came to me disturbingly that he had—changed. It was a subtle sort of change—something sensed rather than seen. His skin had grown brown and leathery from almost constant exposure to sun and wind, and his eyes seemed to have narrowed in a constant searching squint. He looked thinner, too, than when he had first arrived at the mine, and something of the youthfulness of his face had gone.

But it wasn't any of these minor physical transformations that carried any suggestion of strangeness, of *change*. Rather it was something that had taken place in his mind and manifested itself in the glance of his eye, the set of his jaw, the tilt of his head. It was an atmosphere about him, as though he had absorbed so much of

the alienness of Mars that it was beginning to ooze from his very pores.

We approached a network of hill ranges. These formed a number of valleys, and it was toward one, which from the shadows filling it seemed larger and deeper than the rest, that Denning directed the flitterjet. Presently I could see within the valley a group of regular outlines, lighter in color than the surroundings—obviously, I decided, the buildings of an ancient city. The city was our destination, for Denning slanted down toward it and within another few minutes we glided to a landing on the outskirts.

Denning said, "We'll walk the rest of the way. It isn't far."

I nodded and fell into step beside him. Soon we reached a group of single-storied stone houses at the edge of the city, and Denning as though he had done so many times before, strode purposefully toward one of these. We entered a large high-ceilinged room. The room was lighted by a number of broad windows of rose-tinted quartz brick, but my eyes were still accustomed to the glare of sunlight, and at first I could make out no details. Then as my eyes became adjusted to the rosy dimness, I saw that the room was filled with geometric-shaped objects of crystal and quartz in what seemed every conceivable size, shape, and color. The only clear space was that around a table and bench of stone.

Denning gestured around the room, his lips lifted in a smile of dry humor. "My workshop," he said. "This is where I've been keeping myself the past month. Humble, no doubt, but I assure you I have here almost every convenience one could desire. Watch."

Denning looked at the windows, first one, then another. There was the faintest crystalline ripple of sound from each—and then the tints deepened from

rose to crimson, to deep purple, and finally became opaque. The room was dark, except for such light as came through the half-closed door. I grew acutely aware of Denning's shadowy figure beside me, and the alienness of him, of which I'd earlier become aware, was almost an aura of menace.

Denning released a whispering sound that might have been a chuckle. "Watch," he said again.

Abruptly, the room was filled with light. Not from the windows, however. My eyes lifted to the ceiling. Hanging there, pendant fashion, was a large globe which pulsed and blazed with a clear soft radiance.

Denning smiled in amusement at the amazed grimace which twisted my face. He stooped and from the floor lifted a large quartz oblong which he placed upon the table. He looked at it. I could see in its appearance no perceptible change, but shortly wave after wave of increasing warmth washed against my face.

"Light," Denning whispered. "Heat. They had these things—and more. I haven't as yet learned to activate all the crystal objects, but they must have had everything we have now—and in forms vastly more practical and efficient."

DENNING showed me other things.

There was a foot-square cube of milky white crystal which, when he looked at it, showed scenes from all over the planet. I saw Crimson Valley, and Landing City, and several towns whose names I did not know. It was like television of a sort, though we could look anywhere at will and at any distance or angle. There was a squat cylinder, constructed in segments, each of a different color. Denning looked at it, and a strange rhythmic melody tinkled softly through the room.

"They had books, too," Denning

said. "Not in the form with which we are familiar, but books, true enough." From the table he took one of a number of small crystal pyramids. "You have little receptivity, but I'll try to transmit the contents of this to you. Blank your mind as much as you can."

He looked at the pyramid while I concentrated on blankness—and thoughts paraded softly through my mind. They were alien and unintelligible, yet clearly of a didactic and discursive nature, reminding me of lectures back in college days. There were not only prose thoughts, but occasionally diagrams and illustrations, too, which meant equally nothing to me.

"This is a technical work of some kind," Denning stated. "I know little more than you do of what it is all about. I've found a few of what obviously are primers, with thought-pictures and explanations in the ancient Martian thought-forms. I'm learning to understand them, and before long I hope to be able to read the other books." His voice quickened with eagerness. "And I hope that somewhere among them I'll learn what happened to the ancient race that constructed these things—why and how they vanished from Mars."

My mind was spinning under the impact of the wonders which I'd witnessed. I gestured around the room. "But how did they—the ancient Martians—accomplish all this? Thoughts, light, heat, and music—in crystal and quartz. . . . It . . . it's like magic!"

Denning shook his head slowly. "No magic about it. Just science—the science of another race. Somehow they rearranged the molecular structure of these crystal and quartz objects so that they could tap extra-dimensional or sub-spacial energies, manifesting them as heat and light. And somehow the objects were treated so that your own thoughts would be reflected back to you

in somewhat the same way a mirror reflects your image, but changed instead into informative patterns."

"And," I added, "you're one of a very few—if there are any others—who possess the ability to use the objects as the ancient Martians used them."

Denning shrugged slightly. "I'll admit that a superior type of mental equipment is indeed, but don't form the impression that it's equivalent to the keys of the city. I had to *learn* to get the proper results from these crystal and quartz devices. There are ways to use the mind that I never dreamed before existed. And so far I've only scratched the surface of all the tricks the ancient Martians knew."

Denning restored the windows to their former state of rose-tinted transparency and extinguished the blazing globe in the ceiling. He looked thoughtful. "I made a mistake in assuming that ancient Martian culture lacked a mechanical side. But that was because I thought more or less unconsciously in terms of our own culture, and so thinking, I could not find anything which even vaguely suggested a mechanical side. That, of course, was before I accidentally stumbled upon the nature of the crystal and quartz devices through Professor Partrey's death. The ancient Martians did have a science and technology—but a science and technology of the mind rather than the machine. Whether this high state was reached through the usual process of cultural advance or because of a superior type of mental equipment from the outset, I do not know."

Denning stood for a long moment in bemused silence. Then, rousing, he motioned to me, and I followed as he strode from the building.

We spent the rest of the day wandering about the city. When the sun began

to dip toward the horizon, we returned to the flitterjet and flew back to the mine.

DENNING did not remain at the mine much longer. One day he announced his intention of making camp inside the ancient stone building which I had visited. He was first to stock up on supplies in Landing City and then fly to his new quarters. He promised to visit me occasionally at the mine.

Art and I saw him off in the flitterjet. I was not at all reluctant to have him go, for after that demonstration with the crystal and quartz gadgets which he had given me, I'd found him a disturbing person to be near.

The new shaft which we had sunk at the mine proved only to be a waste of time, as some months later the vein which we were working abruptly petered out. Mine No. 1 had become a memory. I radioed the branch office in Landing City and was told to sit tight. Shortly a company freighter arrived, and our equipment was loaded aboard.

Art Finch and the others were transferred to another mine. As for myself, I was sent in a stroke of the most astonishing good fortune to the branch office in Landing City. I joined the staff there as a consultant engineer. My new post had one bright spot, and that was Jean Nettleton. In addition to being quite pretty, she was one of the few young women I'd yet seen who had courage enough to take a job on Mars.

I saw or heard nothing further of William Denning for over two years. During that time I had another of my strokes of good fortune, for Jean Nettleton consented to become my wife. We bought a prefabricated home in Desert View, a booming residential suburb on the outskirts of Landing City.

It was in the spring of 2015 that I

saw William Denning again. A company prospector happened to mention to me that he had found a "queer specimen" living a hermit existence in a deserted city near the Red Hill range. I realized at once that it must be Denning. On one of my days off a week later, I had the prospector, John Whitlock, take me to the city in his flitterjet.

"Better be careful," Whitlock advised, as we landed. "He might be dangerous."

"I know him," I said. "I don't think there'll be any trouble."

We were on the fringe of the city. Some thirty yards away rested another flitterjet, which I recognized as Denning's. It was because of Denning's craft that Whitlock had located him the first time.

I gazed at the nearest stone buildings, and as I did so the door of one slowly opened. The figure of a man in a worn and shapeless coverall moved into sight in the entrance. His hair and beard were long and tangled, and in the mahogany upper portion of his face, his eyes burned bright and wild. It was Denning. In his right hand he held a cylinder of pale blue crystal, pointed at us in the same way a gun is pointed.

Whitlock gripped my arm. His voice reached me softly, tight with urgency. "Don't take any chances with him!"

"William Denning!" I called. "Remember me? It's Tom Grayson."

The strange unkept figure in the doorway peered at me for a long moment. Then the cylinder in his hand slowly lowered.

I heard no sound. Denning's lips did not move. It was only after some seconds that I realized he had spoken to me telepathically.

"Oh . . . Grayson. Welcome, then, and your companion also."

I gestured to Whitlock. "It's all right. Come on."

DENNING stood aside with grave courtesy to allow us entrance into the building. The room into which I walked was quite clean and neat. Denning had built crude shelves of stone slabs around the walls, and on these rested hundreds of crystal pyramids, the books of the ancient Martians. In other places about the room were assorted crystal and quartz devices in all their multitude of colors and geometric shapes.

Denning had closed the door, and now he stood regarding me solemnly.

"I learned you were living here, and I thought I'd pay you a visit," I told him somewhat uneasily. "I've always been interested in your work, and I wondered how you were progressing."

Denning smiled with a ghost of his former boyishness. He spoke, using his voice as though to show his inner complete friendliness. "I knew that when Professor Partrey and I first arrived at the Crimson Valley mine. You already knew of us through the books we had written on Martian archeology, showing you had a genuine interest in the subject. There is much I have confided to you in the past which, if it were not for this, I would not otherwise have revealed."

Whitlock and I were waved to one of two stone benches on either side of a stone table. Denning seated himself on the other, moving, I noticed, with a curious stately grace. He looked at me with his strange wild-bright eyes, and now I saw that what might have been mistaken for insanity or mental unbalance was actually an *other* quality in no way associated with these. Something looked out of his eyes which had been spawned on Mars and had died on Mars and which he had resurrected.

Denning seemed to be waiting for me to say something further. He didn't appear to be eager for news of the out-

side world, or even slightly curious about Whitlock and myself. He gave merely the impression of tolerant friendliness, as though he were ready and willing to answer any questions I might ask, but would hazard none of his own.

"Have you learned what happened to the ancient Martians?" I inquired. "The answer has never ceased to interest me since you first brought it up."

Denning shook his matted head slowly. The unnatural brightness of his eyes seemed to cloud. "No, I have not yet learned the answer. I am not yet able to understand the advanced arracron of the type which would explain what happened to the Thulanni. You see, I am still in the equivalent of high school." He gazed at me a moment, then said, "The Thulanni, of course, are the ancient Martians, and the arracron are the crystal books they left behind."

"But haven't you found any hints of what might have become of the Martians?" I prompted.

"None. Mention is made in several of the arracron of the thinning air and the increasing cold, but with their vast science the Thulanni could easily have sheltered themselves against these. For some reason, it seems, they did not wish to. This apparently precludes any chance of an interplanetary migration—if the Thulanni had ships with which to cross space, which they didn't."

"But the Martians—the Thulanni, that is—did travel? While at the mine, you mentioned that they did, even though they didn't have roads or vehicles."

"Yes," Denning said. "The Thulanni were able to travel about the planet. And they did it in a manner which did not require roads or vehicles. I am not certain as to how, but they simply went in *here* and came out *there*—thousands

of miles away." Denning illustrated his meaning with a wave first of his left, then of his right hand. "They did it most likely with a special thellecron—some one of the crystal and quartz devices in general. The thellecron served as tools and instruments, and as aids in other ways which I am only beginning to understand."

DENNING was silent a moment. His gray eyes gazed into shadowed distances, then slowly returned to an awareness of Whitlock and myself. "Of other things, I know more. The Thulanni were an old race, and very wise. They had evolved to the point where their culture became predominantly a mental one. They came to use their minds as we use our eyes, ears, feet, and hands. This explains the nature of the various thellecron. In a culture largely mental, this was the only useful form machines could take.

"The Thulanni had literature, art, and music, though these had advanced so far as to be in few ways similar to our own. And it will be thousands of years before we begin even to approach an understanding of all the Thulanni knew about such sciences as physics, astronomy, and biology. It will be still longer before we make the first tentative gestures toward fields of knowledge of which we are still ignorant—fields of knowledge which the Thulanni had already investigated thoroughly. Such things as levels of mind, extra-dimensional and sub-spacial energies, time, and hyperspace."

Denning sighed. "I don't expect to learn—much less understand—a tenth of all the things the Thulanni knew. If I learn why and how they vanished, that alone will be enough."

Conversation became desultory. Several times while Denning had been speaking I'd caught unguarded frag-

ments of thought which showed he was having a difficult time in translating and simplifying his explanations so that Whitlock and I would understand them. Much of what he'd said had of necessity been stated in the crudest terms and often erroneously, as our language did not contain the precise terms, nor could our minds comprehend the exact ideas. He'd explained just about all that Whitlock and I could assimilate intelligently, and now we were on our own.

I spoke for a while of events that had transpired since I'd last seen Denning. I knew he was but only slightly interested, but I felt I had to say something. Finally my reservoir of news was dry.

I stood up. "Well, guess I'll be leaving. My wife expects me back for dinner, and it's getting late."

Denning did not speak orally. His thoughts touched my mind gently, warm with friendliness. "I understand. And I am glad you came. I shall look forward to the time when we meet again and I can at last give you the answer."

"I'll be waiting," I said. Whitlock and I shook Denning's hand, and then we went out of the building, to our flitterjet.

IT WAS in 2019 that there began to circulate the first myths about a character whom garrulous frontiersmen called "Old Will-o-the-wisp." From the descriptions given of Old Will-o-the-wisp, I knew beyond all doubt it was Denning. The myths were regarded in the beginning as merely the strange tales men tell of the desert wilderness of Mars, quite often true, but later they strained the credulity to such an extent that they were finally accepted as little more than fantasies. I knew that the stories, stripped of their exaggerations and distortions, were basically true, but I was wise enough to keep silent.

One of the myths told of how Old Will-o-the-wisp made his monthly supply trips to Three Mines, a small town which had arisen to meet the needs of the workers of three large nearby mines. He would appear on the outskirts of Three Mines, walk to the general store, but what he needed, and walk back out of town, vanishing as mysteriously as he had appeared. It was firmly insisted that Old Will-o-the-wisp always came and went into thin air itself which on Mars is pretty thin air indeed. All accounts were emphatic on the point that he possessed no flitterjet or other vehicle of any kind. Mention was frequently made of a green crystal octagon, the size of a man's fist, which Old Will-o-the-wisp constantly carried about with him, but to the narrators this obviously had no significance aside from being ample proof that Old Will-o-the-wisp was as crazy as a sand lizard.

Another story was told of the experience of a mail rocket pilot. He had seen Old Will-o-the-Wisp at Stellburg, a small frontier town which was one of the stops on his daily schedule. Arriving at Wilsonville, the next, and some eight-hundred miles away, he had seen Old Will-o-the-Wisp again. There could have been no mistake in identity, for the appearance of Old Will-o-the-Wisp was distinctive enough not to become confused with that of another person. How Old Will-o-the-Wisp had made the trip between Stellburg and Wilsonville ahead of the mail rocket caused wide speculation, since there is nothing faster than an atmospheric mail rocket, unless an interplanetary passenger liner be considered.

The foregoing were just a few of the stories I heard, and of them all, the most fundamentally truthful. For I remembered what Denning had told me of the Thulanni method of travel—

going in *here*, and coming out *there*. It would seem that he had learned how the Thulanni had accomplished it, and that he had found the method convenient enough to use himself.

By 2021, the stories became so buried under layer after layer of fabrication and embroidery that they came to be regarded as myths pure and simple. Old Will-o-the-Wisp was dismissed as the "Paul Bunyan of Martian mining camps," and as he had disappeared from sight around the middle of 2020, grave doubts became current that he had ever existed at all.

It was in the winter of 2022 that I saw Denning again. This time he got into touch with me. He did it in a way of which only he was capable—by telepathy.

It was night, and I was seated in the living room of my home, reading a newstape. Jean was upstairs, putting our small son, Jimmy, to bed. A soft chuckle sounded—or seemed to sound. Then a voice that was not a voice said softly, "Grayson."

I dropped the newstape from suddenly numbed hands and sat bolt upright in my chair. The soft, soundless chuckle came again.

"Do not be alarmed. This is Denning."

"Where are you?" I whispered into the empty room.

"On the avenue before your home. Will you join me?"

"Yes. In a moment."

I called up to Jean that I was going to take a short walk. Then I hurried into my plastotherm air-suit and left the house. The night was hideously cold, and the thin frost which covered the ground glittered faintly in the clear hard light of the stars.

DENNING was waiting for me beneath a light standard. He waved

an arm when he saw me appear. Held beneath the other arm, I noticed, was a crystal octagon—a crystal octagon like that mentioned in the myths, but much larger and a glowing pale yellow.

"Greetings." The thought was a firm warm hand in mine.

"And to you," I responded. I looked at him, and somehow I couldn't feel much surprise at what I saw. He had changed again. The long tangled beard was gone. In the rays of the light standard his cheeks and chin gleamed brown and smooth. He seemed to have filled out, for his face was round and full. Again I became aware of the curious youthfulness of him, only now it seemed more pronounced. His eyes were still bright and strange, but the wild glitter had gone, and looking into them, I had the sensation of looking beyond, and beyond, as though to the ultimate end of all wisdom and all living.

Denning's mental finger had been on the pulse of my thinking. "Yes—I have changed again. It is a physical change this time, and far-reaching. From the arracron I have learned to alter my body in such fashion as to subsist upon nourishing energies called the kaethonn, which are sub-atomic. But I have learned as well to make other changes in my body, as you can see. The Thulanni were very old and very wise, and they knew these things."

Again I had the impression, as I'd had that day when John Whitlock and I visited Denning in the deserted city near the Red Hill range, that his explanation was groping and inadequate. I could almost *see* his mind sifting and probing among the alien thought-forms of the Thulanni for expressions which he could translate and I could understand.

Denning went on, "The method of making these physical and physiolog-

ical changes was the greatest discovery the Thulanni ever made, for it thereby qualified them for the Trip. As it qualifies me."

"The Trip?" I said. "Then . . . then that is—the answer?"

"Yes, that is the answer. The Thulanni made the Trip. They went to another place—but whether to another dimension, another space, or another time, I do not know. They seemed to know this other place so well that explanations in the arracron were unnecessary. I do know this, however; the Thulanni left Mars because of the thinning air and the increasing cold. They could have made circumventing alterations in their bodies or their environment, but they did not wish to. For some reason they considered themselves as having evolved mentally, physically, and culturally to the point where such alterations would lead only to degeneration and racial extinction. They wanted the race to go on, new and strong and ever growing, and the Trip was to them the best way.

"I do not know my destination. I do not know if this for me will be the beginning of the end or merely the end of the beginning. For it has been many millions of years since the Thulanni made the Trip. During that time they may very well have made a second Trip—and a third. But," and he extended the pale yellow crystal octagon, "this is both my ticket and my means of conveyance. I am ready."

"To make the Trip?"

"Yes. I have kept my promise to you. I have given you the answer—such as it is. Our paths part here, perhaps never again to meet."

"Good luck, then."

"And to you."

We gripped hands and minds in a last farewell. And then Denning lifted the crystal octagon and gazed fixedly

into its depths. It flamed suddenly in his hands. There was a faint soft tinkling as of distant silver bells. And watching, I saw Denning vanish abruptly from sight, as though the very air itself had swallowed him.

I WAS alone there beneath the light standard. Very much alone. It wasn't because of the cold that I hurried so quickly back to the house.

In the days and weeks that followed, I thought often of William Denning and his strange quest. Where had it taken him? What had he found after making the Trip?

I thought of these things, and I thought of the Thulanni, that vanished ancient people who had lived with their minds and used weird crystal machines. The Thulanni who had known all the secrets of time, space, and matter, who had advanced so far that they could change the shape and function of their bodies at will. The Thulanni who traveled by going in *here* and coming out *there*—thousands, and very likely even millions—of miles away. The Thulanni who had evolved so far that only by making the Trip could they avert degeneration and eventual extinction.

I thought of all this, and I constructed theories which I hoped would explain what had happened to Denning. He would, I conjectured, find himself on another world in some unthinkably remote part of space. There the Thulanni would be living, changed in shape and function to meet the needs of that world. Perhaps, if primitive natives already existed there, the Thulanni would imitate their forms. And to me it seemed certain that the Thulanni would not be following the old paths, but would be starting out afresh, climbing the ladder of a new and different civilization.

I constructed theories—and the real answer lay before me all the time, though I never once dreamed it was there. Who could have guessed what shape the answer would take? Yet it was there, requiring only the ordinary, every-day act of reading a newstape to make me see it finally in all its overwhelming implications.

In the newstape was a bit of filler that told of a madman who had been found wandering the streets of New York, on Earth. A babbling idiot who died a short time later in the psychopathic ward of a public hospital as the

result of what the doctors called "a condition brought on by some tremendous psychic shock." The mystery surrounding him was never solved. Not even so much as his name was ever learned. Only one thing offered a clue to his identity and the circumstances underlying his death, but to the authorities it was as much an enigma as everything else. It was an object of yellow crystal, shaped like an octagon, which, at the time he had been taken into custody, the madman had been clutching in his hands.

THE END

(continued from page 97)

speech had not been prepared carefully by Jonas as were his brilliant public utterances, and he soon broke down in a welter of confusing phrases. He glared at Anne and advanced on her threateningly.

"Oh, blast it!" he cried. "You know what I mean."

Anne continued to gaze at him with bright black eyes, an elfin smile on her smooth rounded face. "I am not sure that I do," she said demurely.

Jonas wandered into the room in his absent-minded fashion, glanced at them and quirked his head to one side like a thoughtful bird.

"Oh, yes," he said drily. "I knew there was one more detail to be cleared up. Has he proposed yet, my dear?"

Anne burst into laughter, and Mark grinned sheepishly.

"It looks as though I need your help here, too, sir," he told his Chief Advisor. "If you can still make this wench mind you, please tell her that she is to marry me one week after the Third Bolt

has disappeared into our sun."

"I don't have to tell her," declared Jonas. "She made all the plans for it months ago. You were the one who had to be told, and I am very glad to have it out of the way. We are ready to begin experiments with our first space spheroid, and I'd like to have your attention free. It is my earnest hope that your children and my grandchildren will be able to make the return trip to Earth. Indeed I consider it essential."

"Why so?"

"Men being what they are," said Jonas sadly, "I suspect that by the time the next generation is ready to make the trip, Earth will be in grave need of inspired missionaries to prevent or at least postpone the inevitable decline that always follows a great civilization."

"Then by all means, let us get busy," said Mark forcefully. "We can't let them decline to the point where they start shooting off sunbolts again!"

THE END

THE PROP

by WILLIAM LAWRENCE HAMLING



BOBBY KINCAID reined in his black and white pinto pony and a flurry of dust swept up around him.

"Hey, Skeeter—are you home?"

The boy leaned forward in the sad-

dle, his bright blue eyes sweeping over the small decrepit shanty on the edge of the desert. Small wisps of scraggly grass sprouted around the base of the ancient wood walls. A tumbledown roof leaned crazily forward, with

It lay out in the desert, rusting in the sand, a prop space-ship that had been used in making a movie. But Bobby Kincaid thought it was real, and wanted to fly



patches of tar paper tacked over rotting holes. From the chimney—a rusted length of old stove pipe jutting out from one corner of the roof like a forgotten stump—wisps of smoke stirred.

"Skeeter! It's me—Bobby Kincaid!"

The door of the shack, hanging limply on one hinge, creaked slowly open. A grisly beard covered face peered from the opening.

Bobby waved.

"Hello, Skeeter."

The door pushed open further and a stooped figure shuffled out into the sunlight. The old man blinked his eyes in the glare and then a smile pulled his lips back, revealing a set of craggy yellowed teeth.

"Well, ain't this a surprise! Bobby Kincaid—where did you come from?" He scratched his beard with a long bony finger. "I thought you was away in school."

Bobby laughed. "Skeeter, you old hermit, don't you even know it's summer now? School's out for the year!"

The old man shrugged his stooped shoulders. "Reckon it don't make much difference what time 'o year it be, far as I'm concerned. One season's the same as another out here on the desert, son." He shuffled forward and stood beside the pony. "So you're on your vacation, eh, Bobby? How was school this year?"

Bobby jumped lightly from the pony. "Oh, about the same, Skeeter. I'm going into eighth grade this fall."

"Ya don't say!" Skeeter replied. "Why I recollect when you was no more than a gopher high. Your daddy used to ride out here on the desert past my shack with you perched on the saddle in front of him. . . . Seems just like yesterday."

"I'm growing up, Skeeter. I'm twelve now," Bobby said proudly.

Skeeter slapped the boy jovially on

the shoulder. "Sure am glad to see you again, Bobby. I suppose you'll have a lot of fun with your mom and dad on your ranch this year."

The boy's face clouded and he walked aimlessly about, kicking at the sand. His little mouth was puckered up to the verge of tears.

"What's the matter, son," Skeeter asked haltingly. "Anything wrong?"

"I guess maybe I won't have much fun, Skeeter. Mom is always throwing parties and doesn't have time for me. And dad's directing a big movie and can't get out except on week-ends. When he does come there's always a party."

The old man rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "Well now, don't you like parties? I thought they was supposed to be fun."

Bobby looked up at him with misty blue eyes. "They're grownup parties. And I'm not grownup. Mom sends me off to my room." He kicked a little mound of sand. "Dad promised he'd buy me an airplane this year to play with. But he didn't. I guess they all haven't got time for me. I wanted that airplane too, I want to be a flyer when I grow up."

"An airplane?" The hermit laughed. "Ain't that a mite too dangerous for you, Bobby? You ain't old enough to have one of them—"

Bobby shook his head vigorously. "I don't mean a real, honest to gosh airplane. I mean one I can play with—practice on until I'm old enough to get a real one!"

Skeeter bobbed his head. "Oh. That kind. Why don't you remind him, maybe he just plumb forgot."

"I did," Bobby said bitterly. "But he said he hasn't time now. He said next year. I don't want to wait till next year. I've got all summer, and I want to play."

THERE was a hissing of boiling water from inside the shack. The old man turned. "Wait just a minute, son, I got some coffee brewin. I'll be right back."

Bobby waited. He patted the cool wet nose of his pony and gazed out across the desert. It was calm and beautiful out there. Bobby liked the desert. It was quiet and friendly. The sun shimmered down on the sprawling sand hills, scattered with desert grass and sage brush, and sent streaks of color bounding off to the horizon. He heard Skeeter come out of the shanty.

"I guess I better go now, Skeeter. I don't want to bother you."

The old man looked closely at the boy. He saw the troubled frown that creased the small white forehead, and the misty brightness of eyes that were close to tears.

"You ain't no bother to me, son, I'm mighty glad you dropped in. Say, I just had an idea while I was putting off my coffee. Maybe I can help you find something like the airplane you want so bad. . . ."

Bobby stared at him. "Huh? You? An airplane? I don't understand."

Skeeter grinned, showing his aged yellowed teeth. "Well, now, don't I rightly mean a real airplane, but I reckon it's as close to one as you can get. Maybe more so, cause this plane was made to fly a lot higher and farther than most others. And it's bigger. I—"

"Gosh!" Bobby said. "A ship like that must cost an awful lot of money!" The eagerness left his face suddenly and his eyes fell. "I don't have any money, though, Skeeter. . . ."

"Money?" Skeeter snorted. "Who said anything about money! You can have this ship for nothing, far as I know."

"For nothing?" Bobby's eyes showed amazement. "Doesn't anybody own

it?"

The old man shrugged. "It belongs to the desert now, son. It's been out there for a long time. You can have a good time playing around with it."

Bobby danced wildly about the old man. "Where is it, Skeeter? Tell me where!"

Skeeter grinned. "Take it easy, son, it ain't going to fly away. I guess it never will do that. It's out there, just a couple miles east of the valley trail." He raised a thin bony hand and pointed.

Bobby followed the gesture with his eyes. Eagerness was written all over his round little face. "You sure it will be all right, Skeeter? Nobody will chase me away?"

The old man laughed. "Guess I'm about the only person on this stretch of desert, Bobby. But you want to make sure you don't get lost. Keep to the trail. You'll find it."

Bobby was back in the saddle. He had the reins gripped tightly in his hands. "I'll find it, Skeeter—and thanks a lot!"

The hermit watched him ride off down the trail with wistful eyes. "Just an old forgotten prop, that ship is. Can't do him no harm. Nice kid, that Bobby. Too bad about his folks."

He sighed and shuffled back into his shack.

IT was a long, winding, dusty trail. It curled over the sand like an endless serpent. The sun beat down on it, sending shimmering heatwaves up on the silent air.

Bobby rode down the trail whistling. His eyes were bright, eager. He kept looking off to the right of the road, to the east, as Skeeter had said. He saw only rolling hills of sand and sage brush.

"He said it was a big ship. He said it could fly higher and farther than any

others. Gee . . ." Bobby said softly to his pony. He patted the black and white head. "Gosh, just think, Ginger, a real ship all for myself!"

The pony neighed as if in answer. Bobby started whistling again. Then he stopped and a small frown crossed his face. "Unless maybe Skeeter was just fooling me . . . Hey, Ginger, what's wrong?"

The pony had been trotting along the road when suddenly he reared. The movement almost threw Bobby from the saddle. He gripped the pommel with quick fingers and held on desperately.

Then he heard it. The dry staccato buzzing. He knew what it was even as he heard it. And the knowledge brought a cold chill to his spine.

The horse bolted off the left side of the trail, and Bobby, holding desperately to the saddle, saw the rattler coiled not three feet away in the center of the trail. It struck in a movement too fast for the eye to follow. A blur of motion, of wide open jaws as the pony shot past. Even as the snake lunged forward Bobby grabbed the reins with one hand and pulled sharply to the left. The movement saved them. The horse kicked savagely sideways, just out of reach of the fangs, and before Bobby had time to think, the horse was racing, panic stricken, off over the sands.

For long minutes Bobby held tightly to the reins. They raced through sage brush, over sand hills, past little mounds of earth where prairie dogs would sit at sunset. Bobby pulled at the reins, he dug his legs deep into the pony's sides, but the horse kept running.

"Ginger! Ginger! It's all right, Ginger! Whoa!"

Ginger kept running.

It seemed like hours. But finally,

through sheer exhaustion, the pony slowed. Foam stood out in a lather on the horse's muzzle. His sides were heaving in tumultuous gasps. Bobby loosened his grip on the reins and ran his fingers over the tense, twitching ears of the pony.

"Easy, Ginger. There's nothing to be frightened of now." He looked wistfully about him. "We'll never find it now, Ginger. That nasty old snake had to scare you. We're way west of the trail. But it's all right, Ginger, we'll come back tomorrow. . . ."

Bobby was staring off in the distance. Off toward a bright gleaming mass jutting out of the sand. It was the gleam of metal, a long, tapering mass of metal, lying forlorn under the desert sun.

"Look, Ginger!" Bobby shouted. "Look!"

Ginger looked. But only because Bobby pulled his head in that direction. Ginger must have seen it. But he couldn't talk and say so. Bobby urged him forward.

"Come on, Ginger, that's it! See how it glitters in the sun! It's the ship Skeeter said we'd find out here! And I can have it—it will be mine! Hurry Ginger!"

Ginger couldn't hurry. But he travelled over the sand as swiftly as his tired legs would go. Ginger wanted to lie down, to rest his tired body. He was thirsty. The foam fell in tiny driplets from his muzzle. But he trotted on.

Bobby stared at it. He stared and stared. He looked at it from one end to the other. And a sigh escaped his lips.

"Gosh. Gee. . . ."

IT was all silver and half buried in the sand. It was long and tapered with strange fin-like tubes jutting from its rear. A soft desert breeze whis-

pered around it, sent small flurries of sand scudding along its sides.

Bobby jumped to the ground. He forgot about Ginger, but Ginger didn't mind. He was too tired to care. Bobby walked forward, his eyes round with wonder. He was almost afraid to approach it.

"It's big . . . just like Skeeter said," he breathed. "It's beautiful. And I can have it—all for myself. Gee. . . ."

He walked up to it and thrust out a small trembling hand. It was warm, almost hot under the steady hum of the sun. Bobby ran his hand along the smooth metal surface. The touch brought a thrill to him, of something beyond his understanding, of something new, different. . . .

He walked around the front of the ship. It was all metal, smooth, glittering metal. He came to the other side. He stopped, staring.

There was a small dark crack in the side of the metal. For a moment Bobby thought it was a hole. He walked up to it slowly.

"It's a door!" he breathed. "A door!"

It wasn't a door. But it was the nearest thing to it. Bobby put his hand in the opening and pushed with all his might. A section of the metal slid open soundlessly. It was dark inside.

Bobby suddenly felt fear. It was dark in there. Anything might be inside. Maybe the door would close after him. Maybe he would be trapped, locked inside. On the other side of the ship he heard Ginger neigh.

"Skeeter said it was all right," he said to himself. "There is nothing to be afraid of."

Bobby walked into the opening.

It wasn't so dark inside. The desert sun lanced in through the opening and sent golden lances of light along the walls. Bobby walked forward.

It was a long hall. It was lined with

metal on both walls, and it was silent. Not even the whisper of the desert breeze stirred inside. Bobby walked on.

There was a door. It stood tall and lonely at the end of the hall. Bobby knew it was at the end of the ship, the front end. He looked at the door. There was no handle.

His eyes followed the long seam that ran from floor to ceiling along the door. He knew it was a door. It had to open. Then he saw the button alongside it. Bobby reached out and pressed.

It slid aside. Swiftly, soundlessly. Bobby followed the sunlight into the room.

It was large and oblong. It was all gleaming metal. The faint rays of sunlight, filtering down the hall, gleamed from the metal.

At the far end of the room there was a long banked panel. A row of strangely shaped chairs ran along the front of the panel. The panel itself was a maze of buttons, switches, and dials.

"Gee." Bobby whispered, and his voice sounded small and hollow in the room. "Gosh."

Bobby walked up to the panel.

He saw the bones.

They were slumped over, a tangled heap, leaning against the panel. Two little piles. Arms that were no longer arms, legs that were no longer legs, and grinning spectral skulls.

"Gosh!" Bobby murmured. "Wonder who put them here? Maybe they got locked inside. . . ." Bobby looked fearfully back down the corridor, but the outside door was open, the desert sun streaming in.

There was a small square screen over the panel. "Movies." Bobby decided. He walked past the strange chairs with the slumped over bones. He looked at the myriad dials and rows of buttons. He scratched his head perplexedly. "Gosh, I'll bet it would take a long

time to learn how to fly this ship!"

He stood looking, staring around him. And gradually he felt it, an intangible urge, an astral desire. Bobby knew suddenly what he wanted.

"It's mine now," he breathed. "And I'm going to learn about it. I must!"

THE sun was slipping, a huge red ball in the sky, down over the western horizon. It sent streaks of flame darting across the desert sands, and a cool evening breeze swept in over the heat.

Bobby rode away, his eyes glistening. He hardly saw the desert as Ginger trotted home. He saw only the gleaming silver of the ship that was his. The ship that Skeeter had said he could have.

He reached the ranch just as the sun faded from view.

"Bobby! Bobby Kincaid, where ever have you been!"

Bobby heard his mother's voice calling from the house even as he led his pony to the stable. A caretaker relieved Bobby of the horse and winked knowingly.

"Your mother's been worried about you, Bobby. Better get along inside."

Bobby nodded absently. He ran across the yard, already filling with cars.

"Another party!" he said disgustedly. "Bobby!"

Myra Kincaid stood on the veranda waiting for him. She was a tall beautiful woman, and wore her shoulderless evening dress with the knowledge that she wore it well. Bobby trotted up.

"Yes, mom?"

"Bobby! You've been gone all afternoon. I thought you were only taking a short ride—where have you been?"

"In the desert, mom."

"The desert! Bobby I won't have you riding off like this. Can't you play around the ranch? Now get along in-

side and have your supper."

Henry Kincaid strode out onto the porch. He was a well built man in his forties. He had sleek black hair and the faintest suggestion of a moustache. His eyes were twinkling.

"Well young man! I drive in all the way from Los Angeles to find you gone! What have you been doing?"

Bobby stared from his mother to his father. He ran to his dad.

"I was out to see Skeeter—"

"Skeeter!" Myra Kincaid interrupted. "That dirty old hermit—Bobby I told you to stay away from him!"

"Now Myra, let the boy alone. What about Skeeter, Bobby?" Henry Kincaid gazed down at his son. Bobby smiled.

"Skeeter is a nice old man, dad. I like to talk to him. He's so lonely out there on the desert. . . . Besides, he showed me where the ship was!"

"Ship?" Henry Kincaid frowned. "What ship?"

Bobby spread his arms suggestively. "It's a big ship—all silver and metal. Skeeter said I could have it, that nobody owns it anymore. Gee it's big."

His father gazed thoughtfully for a moment. Then he smiled. "Oh, *that* ship. I see. Well you better get inside and have your supper, Bobby. Mom and I have a party tonight."

Bobby lowered his eyes. "Party?" he said. Then he looked up at his dad. "Can't we play tonight, dad? Just for a little while?"

Henry Kincaid shook his head. "Maybe next week, Bobby, and maybe I'll have a surprise for you. Now get inside."

Bobby walked slowly into the house. Behind him, his mother was frowning.

"What was that business about a ship, Henry?"

He lit up a cigarette and laughed. "Oh, that! Funny, but I had almost

forgotten about it. A couple of years ago we shot some interplanetary scenes for a Martian picture that was later scrapped. We had a special prop spaceship built for the scene. After they were shot we left the hulk out there in the desert. There's nothing in it that could hurt the boy. And he always has been interested in ships. I'm going to bring him that airplane I promised. Come on, let's get back to our guests."

BOBBY hurried with his breakfast.

Ginger was waiting at the stable. Bobby rode out from the ranch, his small face eager.

"Come on, Ginger, mom said I could play all day. I've got enough lunch for both of us!"

Distance sped under the pony. Down the winding road to the edge of the desert, and Skeeter's shanty. Bobby reined in beside the shack.

"Hey, Skeeter! It's me, Bobby!"

There was no smoke coming from the chimney. Bobby called again. Still no answer. He patted the pony's head. "Guess Skeeter isn't home, Ginger. Let's go."

Down the trail. Past the spot where the rattler had struck. Bobby followed Ginger's hoof marks in the sand.

It lay there, still and quiet in the morning sun. Bobby's eyes were bright with pleasure as he looked at it, long and silver and tapering.

"It's still there, Ginger!" he said softly. But Ginger didn't care very much. The pony trotted slowly up to the ship and Bobby jumped to the ground.

His feet made mottled patterns in the sand as he walked around the gleaming hull. The door in the side of the ship was open.

The room hadn't changed any. The panel was still there, the strange dials

and buttons. And the bones. Bobby looked at them for long moments. Then he walked past them and ran his fingers over the small square screen over the panel.

"Just like a movie screen," he said. "Wonder where the movies are?"

There were no movies, but Bobby wasn't sure. He looked at a row of buttons beneath the screen. His fingers moved toward them. He pressed.

From somewhere came a sound. A buzzing hum of sound. Bobby jumped back from the panel fearfully. The buzzing faded.

He looked at the screen. It was shimmering. Little streaks of flame danced across it, a miniature rainbow. And with it came a buzzing hum. The same hum that had faded seconds before. Only this time it was louder—closer it seemed.

And the colors faded.

And there was a face.

SHE was a pretty little girl. She was the prettiest little girl Bobby had ever seen. She was smiling at him with small white flashing teeth. She was laughing with her strange greenish-gold eyes—eyes that seemed to have little sparks dancing in them. And there was sunlight gleaming in her hair—hair that fell softly around small white shoulders.

"Gosh!" Bobby murmured. "Gee, she's pretty—I haven't seen her in the movies before."

The little girl was laughing, Bobby thought. No, she was just smiling—as if she was glad he was looking at her. Bobby looked at her clothes.

"Gosh, she's dressed funny, just a little silver dress. Not much of that either. Wonder what picture she's playing in?"

She was waving now. A small tender hand, a small eager wave. Bobby

turned around, almost expecting to see somebody behind him. Then he laughed.

"There's nobody here but me. She isn't waving at anybody, it's just a movie and . . ."

Suddenly Bobby frowned. He looked anxiously around the room. There was the panel, the bones, and the chairs. There were the switches and dials and buttons. But on camera, no projector of any kind.

"Gee—I can't find any movie machine! Maybe—"

Bobby looked back at the screen. The little girl was still there. But she wasn't smiling. She wasn't laughing anymore. There were tears rolling down her cheeks.

"She's crying!" Bobby said softly. He looked closely at her. But her eyes weren't on him. They were looking past him. Bobby followed her gaze. She was looking at the bones.

"She is looking at them!" Bobby said softly. "She really sees them!"

And then she was looking back at him, almost it seemed, as if she knew what he was thinking. Her head bobbed in a wistful nod, and Bobby watched the tears roll down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, little girl." Bobby pleaded. "Is it because of the bones? Do you know what they are?"

The little girl didn't answer. Only the faint buzzing hum disturbed the quiet. But again her head nodded as the tears fell.

Bobby turned grimly and walked over to the chairs beside the panel. He reached out and gathered the bones together in his hands. Then he shoved them under the panel, out of sight. He turned back to the screen smiling.

"Now you don't have to cry anymore," he said. "You are too pretty to cry . . ."

She looked at him from the screen.

And then suddenly she was smiling again, and there was a longing in her eyes that made Bobby happy inside.

"Where do you live?" he asked. Then he laughed. "I forgot, you can't answer me!" He pointed to her, spread his arms wide, and raised his eyes questioningly.

She seemed to understand.

She faded from the screen.

"Don't go away!" Bobby called anxiously. "Please come back!"

LIGHTS flickered again across the screen. It shimmered, the buzzing grew, a loud crackling hum. And the screen cleared.

The little girl was gone. Bobby was looking at a maze of glistening spires reaching high toward a hazy blue sky. He saw long winding ramps connecting the spires, high in the air. And he saw tiny dots moving along the ramps far below.

"Gosh!" he breathed. "A city! A beautiful city!"

The scene sped on. He saw strange wonderful mountains with snow glistening on peaks that stretched far toward the heavens. He saw green verdant valleys with limpid brooks gurgling through them. He saw endless tracts of flowers waving delicately in a soft breeze. He saw lakes of bright blue water dotting the horizon.

"Gosh!" Bobby whispered.

And he saw the children.

They were playing in the flowers, along the brooks, and by the lakes. There were hundreds of them, boys and girls, in strange costumes of silver and gold. They were laughing and running, playing with strange toys, and—

The scene faded.

"Wait!" Bobby called out. "I want to see more—please!"

She was there again. The little girl. And there were no tears now. Only

gladness and a smile. Bobby smiled back eagerly. He pointed to the screen.

"Gee, that was pretty. All those boys and girls. . . . Where is it at?"

She kept smiling and watching him. Bobby scratched his chin. Then suddenly he bobbed his head. He pointed to himself and then to the screen. "Could I go there and play too?" he asked as he pointed.

The little girl looked wistfully at him. The little sparks danced in her eyes. And she was gone.

For long moments the screen was blank. Bobby peered at it, longingly, hopefully. Why had she gone? Had he frightened her? Where—

She was there. But she wasn't alone. Bobby could see a large white room with strange machines looming in the background. She was standing in the middle of the room talking to a tall man in a white garment. The man was smiling down at her and nodding his head. Then she was looking at Bobby.

Bobby frowned. He didn't understand. Was she trying to show him something else? He watched.

The tall man pulled a gleaming metal panel on rollers to the center of the room. The little girl stood by the panel and pointed to it. Bobby looked.

It had dials and switches and buttons. It—Bobby suddenly looked down at the panel beneath the screen. It was the same kind of panel as the one in the picture!

The little girl pointed to the panel beside her and then to the one beside Bobby. Bobby nodded eagerly. He knew. He knew.

"You're going to show me how it works!" he said.

MYRA KINCAID was worried. It had been nice to get Bobby interested in something so she could put her attention to the parties she had

planned. But Bobby was too interested. He didn't bother her anymore. He was up at dawn, ate a hurried breakfast, had the cook prepare him a lunch, and was gone for the day. She didn't like it.

"Henry," she spoke to her husband over the phone. "Are you sure it was a good idea to let Bobby go running off into the desert like this? He seems to be all wrapped up in that silly old prop ship of yours. I don't like it having him gone all day like this—anything might happen why, just the other day he told of coming on a rattler out there!"

Henry Kincaid thought for a moment over the wire. "Tell you what, Myra. I've finished work on the new picture and have a couple of weeks off. What say we run up to Arrowhead. I'd like to spend a little more time with the boy myself. And I've bought that airplane I promised him. I'll be in tonight, and we'll make plans. See you."

* * *

"Hi, Skeeter!"

Bobby reined his pinto pony in beside the shack. Skeeter sat in the doorway, slowly drawing on a discolored corn cob.

"Why, hello there, son. Haven't seen you around for the last few days."

Bobby shook his head. "I been here a couple of times, Skeeter, but you weren't home."

The hermit sighed. "Had to make one of my trips to town. Nearly ran out of coffee and vittles. By the way, son, did you find that there ship like I told you?"

Bobby looked off into the western sunset, his eyes dreamy. His voice seemed to come from a long way off. "Yes, Skeeter, I found it. Gee, but it's a wonderful ship. It came from a far ways from here, Skeeter, and it can fly back—if you know how!"

Skeeter raised a shaggy eyebrow. "That so? How do you reckon that, son?"

"She showed me, Skeeter, the little girl. Gosh, but she's pretty . . ."

The old man looked questioningly up at the boy. "What girl, Bobby?"

"Why the girl in the picture!"

"Oh," Skeeter said. "Too bad they never released that picture. Yep, she's a mighty pert little miss. Saw her many times myself when they were shooting the scenes. Hair black as a raven."

Bobby frowned. "Her hair isn't black, Skeeter, it's gold. And what do you mean about shooting the scenes—and who didn't release them?"

Skeeter shrugged. "Reckon I can't tell you much about that, son. Better ask your daddy, he knows more about that picture than I do. He directed it."

Bobby looked off across the desert into the sunset. Daddy . . . picture . . . scenes . . . black as a raven . . .

"What's the matter, son?" Skeeter asked.

"Nothing," Bobby murmured. "I better get home now. Mom will be worrying."

Skeeter watched him ride off down the trail. He scratched his beard with the stem of the corn cob. "Can't quite figure him out," he muttered.

THE party was all ready in progress.

Bobby could bear the people laughing and talking in the front part of the house. He heard the clink of glasses and the slow tempo of a waltz from the victrola. He looked sullenly at his food from the kitchen table. He wasn't hungry.

"Ob, there you are, Bobby."

Henry Kincaid came through the swinging door into the kitchen. Bobby looked up.

"Hello, dad."

"Is that all you have to say, Bobby? You don't seem very glad to see me!" his father said, sitting down opposite the boy.

"Dad," Bobby fumbled with his fork. "Skeeter said something about the ship . . ."

"Ship? Oh, that. What about the ship, Bobby?"

Bobby raised wistful eyes. "He said that you were directing a picture—with a little girl—and the ship. Is that true, dad?"

Henry Kincaid nodded. "That's right, son. That's the only reason I've let you go wandering out there on the desert. I had that ship specially built for a fantasy film. It was just a prop that we used in a number of scenes. But the producer cancelled the film at the last minute and it wasn't released. Why do you ask?"

Bobby was close to tears. His eyes were brimming. "Then it won't fly—it won't take me to see—her?"

His father frowned. "What are you talking about, Bobby? Of course it won't fly, you're old enough to know that—it's just a prop!"

Bobby looked down at his plate to hide the wetness in his eyes. His father leaned over and patted his shoulder.

"But I've got a surprise for you, Bobby. I've got some time to myself now, and you, mom and I are going up to Arrowbead in the morning for a holiday! How does that sound?"

Bobby didn't answer.

"And do you remember how I promised you an airplane to play with? Well, I'm having it shipped up to Arrowbead for you. How do you like that?"

Bobby didn't answer.

"What's the matter, Bobby? Aren't you glad? . . ."

Bobby looked up. The tears were gone. His little face was white and drawn. "It's got to fly. I know it will

fly. She wouldn't lie to me!" he said savagely.

"Bobby—what—"

Bobby dropped his fork with a clatter and ran up the backstairs to his room. . . .

THE party was over, the guests departed. Henry Kincaid yawned across the veranda toward his wife.

"I'm glad that's over. I'm so tired I could sleep standing up."

Myra Kincaid smiled. "Why don't you hurry off to bed? I'll be up in a few minutes. We've got a long ride ahead of us in the morning. Did you tell Bobby?"

He nodded. "I did, and he didn't seem pleased at all. That damned prop ship seems to have some kind of interest for him. Think I'll look in on him upstairs. Haven't heard a peep out of him since supper."

Upstairs, he walked slowly along the hall toward Bobby's room. Outside the door he stretched again. Then he opened the door and looked into the room.

It was empty.

"Bobby!" he called out sharply. There was no answer. He walked out into the hall and called again. "Bobby!"

Downstairs Myra Kincaid came in from the porch. "What's wrong?" she called up.

Her husband came running down the stairs. "Bobby isn't in his room!"

She frowned. "What? But that's impossible. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" he snapped. "I tell you he's not there!"

They ran out on the veranda and looked out across the moonlit yard. It was empty.

"Bobby!" Henry Kincaid called sharply.

There was no reply. Over by the stables a light was on in the caretaker's

house. The door opened.

"Were you calling, Mr. Kincaid?"

Henry Kincaid shouted across the yard. "Have you seen Bobby anywhere, Mike?"

Mike shouted back. "Yes, sir, he saddled Ginger about an hour or so back. Said something about a ship and he'd forgotten something. Said you had told him he could go."

Henry Kincaid swore in the darkness. Myra moved alongside him.

"Did you hear that, Henry? He's out in the desert—at night! He went to that ship of yours! Henry, I'm frightened!"

He took her arm grimly.

"Come on, we'll take the station wagon. I don't like this any more than you do. The boy might lose his way out there. If it hadn't been for that old hermit he wouldn't have gotten these ideas in his head!"

THE Moon shone full and clear on the trail. Down it, the Kincaid station wagon jounced at high speed. A trail of dust swept up behind it and spread over the sand like a cloud.

Henry Kincaid gripped the wheel tightly in his hands. He peered ahead in the glare of the headlights. Beside him his wife sat, her fingers knotted together helplessly. A building loomed ahead.

"That's Skeeter's shack," he announced. "Bobby might have stopped there."

He braked the car alongside the shack and honked loudly on the horn. A few moments later Skeeter came through the door, rubbing his eyes in the glare of the car lights.

"Hello?" he called out.

"It's Henry Kincaid—I'm looking for Bobby, did he come by here an hour or so ago?"

Skeeter scratched his beard thought-

fully. "Well now, that's a mighty peculiar thing, Mr. Kincaid. Seems like I did hear a horse beating past here, hut I didn't think much about it. You say it was Bohhy?"

"Yes, yes." Kincaid snapped impatiently. "He snuck out of the house while we were giving a party. I think he's gone out to that old prop ship. I thought you might have seen him."

Skeeter shook his head. "Bohhy shouldn't go out on the desert at night like this. Mind if I come along? I can show you just where that ship is, case you've forgot."

Kincaid shrugged. "All right, get in the back. Hurry up!"

Skeeter shuffled into the car scratching his beard. "Guess maybe I shouldn't have told him about it, Mr. Kincaid, but I didn't see no harm in it . . ."

Kincaid drove rapidly. The headlights cut a swath in the gloom along the trail. They drove in silence.

Skeeter was peering intently through the windshield at the trail. Ahead of him, Henry Kincaid pointed.

"Where does that trail lead?"

Skeeter looked at a narrow path of hoof marks off to the left of the road.

"Can't recall ever seeing them before," he replied. "That's funny . . ."

They drove on. Minutes later Myra Kincaid stiffened in the front seat.

"There it is!" she cried, pointing off to the right of the road.

There it was, a rusted hulk of metal, rising lonely in the moonlight. Kincaid shot the car off the trail onto the loose sand. He held grimly onto the wheel and braked the car beside the hulk.

"I don't see Ginger," he muttered.

They hurried from the car.

"Bohhy!" Kincaid called sharply. His voice faded over the sand. There was no answer. They stood waiting.

Skeeter mumbled in the gloom. Kincaid looked at him.

"What did you say?"

SKEETER pointed at the ground around them. "Mr. Kincaid, I reckon Bobby ain't never been here—there ain't nary a footprint or a hoof mark around this ship!"

"But that's impossible!" Kincaid replied. "All he's been talking about is this ship! You yourself told him where to find it! Where else could he have gone?"

Skeeter was running his fingers through his beard. Suddenly he stiffened. "Mr. Kincaid—you remember that little trail off to the left of the road backaways?"

Kincaid nodded nervously. "What about it?"

"Well now, I can't recollect any trail like that hereabouts. A horse, like Ginger could have made a trail like that. . . ."

Kincaid swore. "By God, you're right. Come on Myra!"

They tumbled back in the station wagon. Back on the road, eyes peering feverishly through the windshield. Beside him, Kincaid heard his wife gently sobbing. He set his teeth.

There it was, the trail. Skeeter pointed a long hony finger at it as Kincaid shot the car off the road. The sand was loose and the car swerved as the rear wheels bit in. Kincaid felt sweat beading his face.

The minutes sped by. Kincaid gripped the wheel tightly in his hands as he guided the car along the dimly revealed trail. The lights of the car were twin beams of light stabbing through the darkness.

And then Myra Kincaid sobbed hysterically.

"Ginger! Henry, there's Ginger!"

He peered intently and heard Skeeter swear behind him.

"Damned if it ain't! That's him all

right!"

"The trail ends here too!" Henry Kincaid said wearily. "We've found him!"

They piled from the car. Ginger, hobbled in the sand ahead, whinnied plaintively.

"Bobby!" Kincaid called out.

There was no answer. He gripped his wife's arm tightly as they looked frantically about. Skeeter shuffled up behind them.

"Can't understand it. There ain't no ship here, this ain't the way I told him to go. I—"

He broke off in mid-sentence. He was staring ahead, where tiny footprints were legible in the sand. The Kincaids saw them too. But they weren't looking at just the footprints.

"Ship?" Kincaid muttered strangely.

"Ship?"

They were looking at a deep tapering depression in the sand, with the footprints guiding around the edges of it. Footprints that had walked up to something, up to it and around it. At one end of the depression the sand was scorched and blasted away.

Skeeter stared dumbly.

"Don't rightly reckon I understand this," he muttered. "Bobby said he found the ship. Said there was a little girl . . ."

He looked off into the night suddenly remembering.

"He said she had gold hair—but I remember plain as day her hair was raven black!"

The stars twinkled down into his eyes. "Reckon I never saw *that* little girl, Bobby," he whispered.

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